

Gentleness and self-control

Over the Summer we are exploring the passage from Galatians where St.Paul speaks about the fruit of the Spirit.

As an introduction St.Paul explains that we have been given freedom through Jesus Christ, but that freedom is not permission to live as we like and indeed he gives a long list of "sins of the flesh" which we are actively to be rid of.

In listing the fruit that comes from living in step with God's Spirit, he points out that there is no limit and no law against such virtues.

As I've been reading and pondering the topic, it is clear to me that we are to cooperate in being led down the pathways of the Spirit. We should seek them out. If we walk in step with the Spirit of God the virtues we seek will grow.

I like the idea of pathways, it's an image I can have in my mind as I think about how I would like to experience more of the work of the Spirit in developing peace and patience, love and joy and today's two gentleness and self-control.

One of the joys of cycling in Holland, or as I call it, the blessed flat land, is the signposting system for navigating the hundreds of miles of cycle paths. We've stayed in this area and are reasonably familiar with which numbers you need to find and which comes next. I won't say I've never got lost, but it's not been for long.

Sadly we can't navigate life quite so simply particularly when we have passions pulling us off course.

Last week I explored Peace and Patience and the pathway along which these two will grow was righteousness. Rather than exhaust ourselves trying to live rightly, the answer as always was faith and

trust...faith that God will lead us. Our contribution is the daily decision to follow, to place faith and trust in God.

The pathway for Gentleness and self-control is strength.

My dictionary of theology said, Gentleness. Sensitivity of disposition and kindness of behaviour, founded on strength and prompted by love.

In Isaiah chapter 40 it says

See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power,
and he rules with a mighty arm.

See, his reward is with him,
and his recompense accompanies him.

¹¹ He tends his flock like a shepherd:

He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young.

It is a wonderful image. The Sovereign Lord who has ultimate power and authority, who sustains all things and created all things, is best depicted as a loving shepherd carrying the lambs.

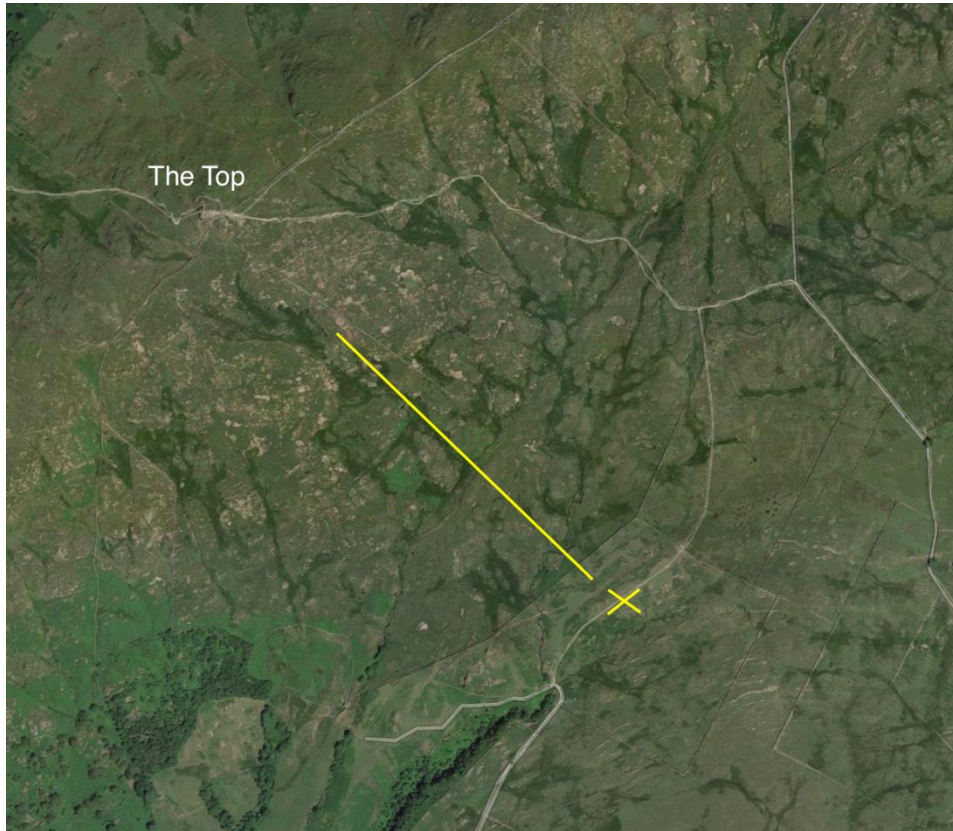
Gentleness seeks to care for those in need and seeks to win over those who disagree. It is a long road not a short-cut which is why strength is required.

Thinking of this I recalled a walk I did in the Lake District not that long ago.

This aerial picture shows where I was walking and when I reached X...it occurred to me that I might as well just walk straight to the top. I couldn't see how far the path would take me before it turned back on itself and headed for the top. As you can see it wasn't

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THAT far but from ground level it wasn't clear and not all these paths show up on the maps. So off I went on the direct route.



Which I came to regret.

Gentleness is the long way round. It's the longer pathway. It requires the fruit of kindness and patience or longsuffering as the KJV has it. It seeks to win over not demand. It prefers peace to conflict. It requires great strength of character to be gentle when you are tempted to take the short cut and get what you want by shouting, demanding and kicking up a fuss.

Jesus rode into Jerusalem in humility on a donkey. He came in gentleness, not as a warrior messiah.

Self-control is another virtue that is a longer pathway.

Each of us will be aware of the areas of life over which we wish we had more discipline. What have I just said??

Over which we WISH we had more discipline. That's what it comes down to. Idly wishing we had more self-control. And our lack of self-control is most often to get us what we want. The short cut of shouting or displaying anger, the short-cut of greed to satisfy our need, the short-cut to find some comfort and peace because we can't face our real issues.

Over the years there has been all sorts of television programmes that examine the result of a lack of self-control. It might be a team that helps clear the house of someone who hordes or helping people whose eating has got out of control or whose spending has got out of control.

In each of these situations there is an underlying cause and the individual needs help to find the strength to examine the painful root of the issue.

None of which is a surprise to those of us who agree with St.Paul who had his own severe battle with temptations. "I know what I want to do – but don't do it. I know what I don't want to do...but I do it".

And none of us can point that finger at someone else who lacks self-control, because we do too. One of our confessions has the line, *Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we confess that we have sinned in thought, word and deed.* We probably sin most in our

Gentleness and self-control thoughts, and our words more than deeds...but nevertheless we do. Helpless lot that we are!

My English Standard version study Bible said "self-control is the discipline given by the Holy Spirit that allows Christians to resist the power of the flesh".

GIVEN. Not earned. Given. The Holy Spirit gives the strength and the discipline so that we can "marshall and direct our energies wisely" (quoting Eugene Peterson).

How do we take this pathway?

I think the first step is gentleness with ourselves. We can be so severely critical of ourselves. We beat ourselves up because we are not what we want to be.

In humility we come and acknowledge our need, for forgiveness and for God's strength and the pathway of strength which will bear the fruit of gentleness and self-control is one which you walk in company with Christ. Seek Him and the rest follows.

St.Paul prays this for the Ephesians...

¹⁶I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

This experience will reveal how great the love of Christ is for us and its only in the company of Christ we'll gain the self-control and gentleness we seek.

There is one other step we can take. Accountability. Sharing with a friend what we are grappling with, receiving their prayers and sharing

the journey of overcoming a particular issue is sound biblical practice. This is not new, but it means we remain a company of people with integrity and transparency without any falseness and show to our spirituality.

(NB – for those reading on-line. After this talk we entered a period of worship during which we sang a gentle song acknowledging our need for forgiveness and then the Hymn "May the mind of Christ my Saviour live in me from day to day". Between each verse prayers were offered asking for the grace to live by the Spirit. This worship led directly into the Eucharist prayer)