

TIMES AND SEASONS

Returning from a holiday in North Yorkshire, I am so thankful for the great blessings of time, space and peace of (mainly) sunny days walking in an open landscape under a wide sky. I know how fortunate I am. That I shared the time with my son made it doubly precious. We even enjoyed outdoor visits to the local pub. Bliss it was, in the evening sunshine, on the village green, with a pint of Timothy Taylor's and a packet of cheese and onion. The small pleasures of 'normal' things were much appreciated.

Now I am home and it is back to earth with a bit of a bump. I read today's Epistle text with a certain impatience. I have lost track how many times I have preached on Paul's writings on the 'desires of the flesh' and the broader context of the division in the early Church between the founding Jewish Christians and the Gentile converts, over the observance of the Jewish Laws of Purity. As with the clashes between Jesus and the Pharisees over the pointlessness of their show of observing physical rituals and practice which glosses over hidden sin, part of the contention was that all the laws and rites in the world could not mask the truth of what drives a person from within.

But I wondered what might these readings say today, in these strange and unsettling times? Was there anything to lift the heart, to comfort or inspire as we contemplate the months ahead of us? By the time you read this we will have had more statistics to digest, more lockdown policy announcements, more arguments and opinions being thrown around. Beyond all that, the majority of us will be trying to stay well, to consider the NHS, and think through what impact our behaviours might have for good or ill on the health and survival of others. To say we each carry a part of that inescapable responsibility is a statement of the obvious, but that does not make it any easier to navigate. Perhaps this is one way of looking at Paul's injunction not to gratify the 'desires of the flesh'. Does it serve as a reminder not to take risks doing those things which make us feel good for a time, or suit our purposes, but could have a bad impact on the lives of others as well as ourselves; not to thoughtlessly lose control and go hang the consequences? That is not the issue Paul was addressing, but a good principle works in more than one context especially when it is part of that same ethos as 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. What Paul wrote next is perfect in *all* times and *all* seasons. He told the Galatians there was no law against love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, and gentleness. They are right for all situations. What a brilliant idea - to compare all the good, holy, beautiful qualities of the Spirit to something sweet and nourishing, to be shared and enjoyed. However, being Paul, he reminds us that self-control is important too!

One thing that a good holiday does is restore perspective and lift us out of self-absorption, and so the landscape and people of Yorkshire reminded me that nature, wildlife and the beauty of Creation remain, and are to be valued and protected; that almost all the people I meet *are* friendly, careful and considerate, find humour in difficult times, are stoic, positive, and inspire hope and strength. Our times are in His hands, who is our Saviour. May all of Creation know the blessings of the fruits of the Spirit.

Gill Williams