

KINDNESS

The harvest of the Spirit is set forth for us in Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians Chap. 5 vv. 22-23. Most often, when the passage is quoted, a person is heard to say, "The harvest of the Spirit is love, joy, peace etc," leaving it at that, as though the other six qualities listed were somewhat lesser fruits. Yet they are surely not many separate fruits but rather a single harvest, inseparable from each other, and it is perhaps worth noticing that the one occupying the fifth or central place is kindness.

The word 'kindness', these days, tends to have something of a flabby overtone about it – one is kind to children, old ladies and animals – but it is not considered to be a strong virtue. If, however, we look at it more closely, we can see that it includes patience, goodness, fidelity, gentleness and self-control, all the other fruits of the Spirit, and leads in the end to those seemingly primary ones of love, joy and peace.

Kindness involves looking benevolently on people, looking on them with a good will, seeing them as persons who have as much right to exist and be themselves as we have. It involves accepting them as they are; looking for what is good, glorying in differences. It does not mean condoning sin or evil; indeed that is not kind at all. No, kindness involves acknowledging that another person is as equally likely to be right as we are. It involves that most elusive virtue, humility, which acknowledges that God is God, we are his creatures and only he can see into a person's heart and judge rightly.

It is not always possible to like the people we meet but it is always possible to wish that God will bless them in every way, since we are taught by Jesus to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors and those who treat us spitefully. (Matthew 5:44).

Kindness, then, involves gentleness, not the insipid weakness which lets other people get away with murder unchecked, but the strong gentleness which recognises the hurt in others and is self-controlled

enough not to lash out in anger, which serves only to aggravate the injury anyway. Kindness will absorb any hurt, and will wait with patience for the right moment to say or do something. Kindness does not reject anyone; it has the fidelity of the father in the parable of the prodigal son, waiting patiently, year after year, for his son to come to his senses. Then, when the son does reappear, there are no recriminations but complete and utter acceptance and forgiveness. The father's kindness is shown also to the elder son. He does not castigate him for his meanness of spirit, but gently corrects his mistaken view of life. Correction may indeed have to be a very necessary part of kindness, but it must always be done with love and with the interests of the other person at heart, not merely to give vent to irritation!

Moreover, kindness practiced in season and out of season, cannot help but create joy. It is a warm virtue and other people coming under its influence feel themselves expand and relax. It enables others to be themselves and thus reduces the tension involved when people pretend to be something other than they really are. If individuals know that they are accepted, warts and all, they cease to be so defensive, and therefore an atmosphere of peace can prevail. Not the peace which is the mere absence of aggression, but the deep peace which keeps one steady in spite of all the difficulties that crop up. It is this peace that we wish one another when we exchange the Peace during the Eucharist. Such peace is the outcome of suffering accepted and transformed, so that, instead of being negative and destructive, it becomes a positive force for good.

One can therefore truly say that kindness is the precursor of love. Indeed love is the inevitable outcome of all the fruits of the Spirit. In Chapter thirteen of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians we find that famous song in praise of love: love is patient, KIND, does not envy, is not conceited or rude; it is not selfish or quick to take offence, doesn't keep an account of wrongs done, nor rejoice over someone else's misfortune, but delights in truth.

However, not only are individuals encouraged to be kind and loving to one another; the same applies to groups. Do families look benevolently on other families, parishes on other parishes, one class or colour on another, denominations or faiths on each other, rival political parties or even nations?

Are we as Christians, kind to those who have different theological opinions? Do we honestly pray that God will bless them richly, or do we have an underlying presupposition that the best way for God to bless them would be by bringing their ideas and beliefs into line with our own? Again, kindness will look on what is good in the other and will absorb without any retaliation any hurt sustained. It will seek to keep a relationship going even when there are great difficulties and will wait in patience for the right moment to act.

Finally, there is an aspect of kindness, which can be applied to inanimate objects. We should look with a kindly eye on things and respect their nature. If we abuse anything, be it a saucepan, a computer, or atomic energy, the result is always some sort of loss if not catastrophe. In his sixth century Rule for Monks, Saint Benedict, no doubt inspired by Zechariah 14: 20-21 says that the goods of the monastery are to be treated as if they were the vessels of the altar. They are gifts from God and as such are to be handled reverently. If we take the trouble to find out about things, how they work, how best to use them, then they in their own way 'respond' and give us much service or pleasure.

Kindness, then, is a very basic quality; one speaks of the 'milk of human kindness'. Milk, the simplest food and yet containing in it all the nourishment necessary for a baby to grow and thrive. Our little everyday acts of kindness, mostly soon forgotten, are the stuff that builds up communal life. They may not be heroic, but without them, it would be impossible for the harvest of the Spirit to grow and come to maturity.