

Doing Good! – The Sixth Fruit of the Spirit

Today we remember all the soldiers in past generations who have fought a just war, and in particular those of the First and Second World War. No good person wants war, and no good person wants to fight against an enemy, but sometimes there is the moment that we need to stand up and be counted, and to declare our war against evil.

“The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”
Attributed to Edmund Burke, and also quoted by John F Kennedy in a speech in 1961.

There is no doubt that the ideology that was dreamed up in the Nazi regime was evil - the innocent assault on the weak and the vulnerable, the incarceration of the Jews, and the gas chambers; but also, the desire to control the world with that corrupt ideology needed to be opposed, and so our young men and women responded to the call to protect goodness and righteousness, and took up the fight against that enemy. Look around the windows of this church and you will see that this war left a massive scar on our world. Look at the names here on the doorway - young people from this community who sacrificed their lives for the sake of pursuing goodness.

Today we remember them, and remember the fact that, for them, they were pursuing goodness. They went to fight believing that they were stopping an evil cancer spreading throughout our world and that's what we remember today in our churches up and down the land of Scotland.

Now there may be different opinions about war, and that's fine, but the sacrifice of our men and women must be remembered, for it was a costly affair to them, and one that halted the spread of that evil, albeit at the cost of millions of human lives.

But it brought about a great goodness and we thank God for the peace and stability that we have known in our lifetime.

But the battle has not ended, because it is still there in the hearts of human beings to control others, in our world today. Today I want us to consider the Sixth Fruit of the Spirit, Goodness.

We grow up with the saying, *Be good!*

As a child it's the last thing that your mum will say to you as you part company: *Now, be good.* She wants you to do the right thing, behave in a certain way and do nothing that will bring shame upon the family – *Be good!*

No doubt the young men and women who left here to go and fight, heard these same words - *be good*.

But what is goodness? What does good mean? It's a word with such wide meaning. You might be good at a sport or a hobby but that is surely different from being a good person.

Last week we considered kindness, and realised that this is a virtue that Christ possessed in abundance - but is goodness not much the same thing?

In the psalm we sung together...*All people that on earth who dwell for the Lord is good and his mercy endures forever.*

So, when we speak about God's goodness, we are suddenly in a different zone from human goodness.

The biblical writers understood God to be good. Men like Job, who lost everything, and yet in the midst of his suffering held on to this one constant, the goodness of God.

As Christians that is where we begin our journey to understand goodness. It begins with God. For God is good.

Goodness and kindness are closely connected - they are like cousins or siblings. They bear the same stamp and come from the same family. But when we look at the word goodness that Paul uses, we discover that it is a word that is peculiar to the bible.

The Greek word for goodness is *agathosune*, and the Bishop of Dublin, R.C. Trench, said that Jesus demonstrated this quality when he cleansed the Temple and drove out those who were abusing the sacrificial system.

This give us an understanding of God's goodness. It's not a passive goodness, but rather a goodness that moves one to action. It's a goodness, that says, I can't take this any longer, and moves one to do something good for God.

In Christ's life we see this demonstrated, time and time again.

His righteous anger against injustice. He cleansed the Temple. He was angry against those who were abusing it.

His righteous anger against sin. Yes, he saw that sin led to death and that's why he broke his heart at his friend Lazarus's tomb, for he saw the consequences of sin.

His righteous pursuit for the Kingdom of God to come into this world was what characterised him – with a passion for goodness and righteousness, he preached the Kingdom of God, a new world was coming where God would reign.

So, goodness and righteousness are closely connected.

When we speak of God's goodness, I believe that we are speaking of his righteousness. That God will always do the right thing. Now we might not think that at times, as we look around our sin-filled world, a world torn apart by human greed and misery, but into that world comes the goodness of God.

God is in this world healing and restoring and that is where the goodness of God is to be found. This is what Christ was all about. He came to seek and save the lost. He came to bring healing and wholeness to bring us back again to our Heavenly Father.

Jesus wants his followers to have – goodness.

I'm sure that it is something that we all try to live out. We try to be good. To act in a way that is morally acceptable to our peers. We want to be good.

But as children, even with the best intentions to be good, sometimes we let ourselves down and let others down, and that happens also as adults. We are not as good as we would like others to think we are.

The strange fact is that we are a mixture of good and bad. We have this battle within our souls. Paul knew it only too well. He wrote, *“I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead I do what I hate”*
Romans 7:15.

We've all been there, haven't we?

Why did I say that? I didn't mean to say something as harsh as that? I couldn't help it, it just came out, and so the goodness that we would like to have shown has been tarnished. Even more so with social media: we need to be so careful, because it's not just one person that will see or hear but perhaps hundreds or thousands.

In *The Beatitudes*, Jesus said, *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled”*.

Notice that Jesus said that the blessing comes to those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...those who pursue it, those who desire it and those who want it. These are the people who will be filled with it.

So, when we strip goodness back to what Jesus expects, it's a goodness that is focused on doing the right thing – doing God's thing. In biblical terms, it's about

obeying God's will. So, it takes us to the Lord's Prayer. *“Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”*.

That’s Jesus's understanding of goodness – not some nebulous, wistful, dream, but an intense desire to do what is good because it is what we are designed to be and do. It is God's will for us.

When God created the world, he stood back and said, *it is good!*

Nobody is given a book when they are born, *how to be good*. No, we are born into a world where we have to learn goodness, and if we are blessed, we are nurtured by our parents. A good childhood will stand us in good stead, but there is something else which we have, and that is the Spirit of God.

The God who gave us the Ten Commandments, the moral imperative to do what is good and right.

When we surrender our lives to him, and accept his way, and walk in his truth, and receive him into our hearts, then we have a new teacher and a new spirit, who will work within us and will enable us to pursue, and hunger for, what is right.

So, it's important that we look to the one who gives us his Spirit, and who produces his fruit in our lives.

And it's important for us to look to Jesus and see how he pursues goodness, with his anger against injustice. How he attacks the Temple practices of his time. A system that was cheating the poor, and lining the pockets of the wealthy. He turns the tables, and he chases out the sellers from the Temple. He disturbs the *status quo* and the money lenders, and attacks the heart of the Jewish sacrificial system, which was not producing goodness, but was rather evil. He did this because he hungered for righteousness, for goodness.

The bearing of fruit is not just an option for the Christian life, it is a spiritual requirement. To be called a Christian is to bear witness to Christ and so to be fruitful like him.

There is a very interesting account of Jesus cursing a fig tree. In **Mark 11** and **Matthew 21**, when he came upon a fig tree and he was hungry and there were no figs on the tree and Jesus said, *“No man will eat fruit of you hereafter”* and the next morning the fig tree had shrivelled up.

Whatever you make of this story, especially if you are a tree lover, this is a symbolic warning to his disciples of the necessity of not bearing fruit that will last.

The fig tree in Palestine was a symbol of prosperity and peace. In the days of Solomon, there was a vision that each man would sit under his own vine and fig tree. **1 Kings 4:25.**

The fig tree represented Israel, and everything that was wrong, especially with its leaders. Its nation had stopped producing the fruit that God desired and this was what Jesus had come to change, to make Israel a fruitful nation again. But there were no easy options, and the tree that was Israel under its present state would have to die, and a new tree be planted in its soil. Then this new tree would take the shape of a cross and on that cross would begin the new Israel, God's church.

From the cross, countless people would know their sins forgiven, a new life starting and the opportunity to bear spiritual fruit. That for me is the message of the fig tree: that which bears no fruit must die, and a new life must emerge that bears fruit.

When God looks at our lives, does he see a desire to hunger for goodness and righteousness?

Notice, what Jesus is looking for is the hunger for righteousness, it's the desire to do the right thing.

In his autobiography, Gandhi tells that during his early years in South Africa he did enquire into Christianity, He attended a church in Pretoria for several Sundays, but he says, the congregation did not strike him as being particularly religious; they were not an assembly of devout souls, but appeared rather to be worldly minded people going to church for recreation and conformity to custom. He therefore concluded that there was nothing in Christianity which he did not better possess. Gandhi was driven away from Christianity – and with what staggering consequences – by the fact that he did not see spiritual fruit in the branches of those who profess Christ.

This in itself is a parable for us that our lives can attract our people. Our lives can be like a fruit tree, full of the best of fruits or it can be like the fig tree that has leaves but no fruit.

By coming to Christ, we can know the blessings of goodness, his goodness in our life and that, being in him, our lives will bear much fruit.

So today, on Remembrance Sunday, we remember the importance of goodness and we remember those young people who fought for goodness, but we also remember Jesus who ultimately died to make us good.

Let me finish with the words of a famous Easter hymn:

There is a green hill far away,

*outside a city wall,
where our dear Lord was crucified
who died to save us all.*

*We may not know, we cannot tell,
what pains he had to bear,
but we believe it was for us
he hung and suffered there.*

*He died that we might be forgiven,
he died to make us good,
that we might go at last to heaven,
saved by his precious blood.*

*There was no other good enough
to pay the price of sin,
he only could unlock the gate
of heaven and let us in.*

*O dearly, dearly has he loved!
And we must love him too,
and trust in his redeeming blood,
and try his works to do.*

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
Amen.