

Self-control and Hope

Today, on the First Sunday of Advent, a Sunday that we traditionally look at the theme of hope, it is good for us again to pause and think about hope. What is hope? And what can hope bring to us?

Today we also want to reflect on the 9th Fruit of the Spirit, *self-control* and to see that there is a connection between hope and self-control.

Firstly, hope is such a powerful resource to have. Without hope there is no future. With hope there is a window of opportunity, something to grasp onto.

It was hope that kept the prisoner of war sane in the camp. The hope that he would see his family again, that he would be with his children and his wife.

Without that hope there would be no future, for when hope is extinguished the light goes out.

Viktor Frankl, Jewish prisoner of war, believed that “Love is the ultimate and highest goal to which man can aspire”. But he asks the question, what allowed him to hold onto this belief so fervently amidst the moral deformity of the Holocaust?

In his classic book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Frankl’s autobiographical testament of his time in Auschwitz, he offers this explanation: “Those who know how close the connection is between the state of mind of a man, his courage and hope, or lack of them, and the state of immunity of his body will understand that sudden loss of hope and courage can have a deadly effect”.

To illustrate his point, Frankl details for us his theory on the record high death rate in Auschwitz during Christmas 1944 to New Year’s Day 1945: that prisoners died because they had expected to be home before Christmas. When they realised this was not to be, they completely lost hope in life beyond the concentration camp.

Frankl wrote, “He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.”

This leads us on to our reading this morning.

Before the birth of Jesus, the wick of the candle of Israel was burning low. There was darkness in the land and people were living in a wilderness of

fear. One of the popular advent readings is from Isaiah 9:2, “The people who walked in darkness...”

This is our starting point for Advent.

We do not appreciate the light until we understand the darkness, and there has been a lot of darkness this past year.

Sometimes we rush into Christmas, we want to get immediately to the Bethlehem, to the bright star, the dazzling angels, and their announcement of peace on earth, the birth of a child, the visits of shepherds in worship and the wise men coming with their gifts, but the reality of that first Christmas is that people were walking in darkness.

Their country was oppressed and the Roman Empire had a stranglehold on them. Some of their own religious leaders had become collaborators with the Empire and some of them turned to their religion, but they turned their noses into the law books and they strangled the spiritual life out of the ordinary people.

The people walked in darkness both materially and spiritually.

The country yearned for a saviour, someone who would offer them hope.

But hope for Isaiah lay in the future. Hope always is in the future. But it is this hope that kept them going.

In the darkest moment, a light was sparked and a candle was lit, as a baby was born.

And the rest of Isaiah prophecies becomes true, “The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of deep darkness a light will shine”.

What was the light and how did it come?

Now we look at self-control.

Mary, an obscure young Palestinian woman, was visited by an angel and was told that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and the power of the Most High will overshadow her and the Holy One to be born will be the Son of God.

Mary, perhaps the tender age of 14, reacts to this statement with the maturity of someone much older. She is resigned to her destiny. She

shows remarkable self-control and she responds, "*I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said*".

Over the last 9 weeks, we have visited each Fruit of the Spirit, and we have discovered that each fruit has its own particular beauty.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Today, we come to the final Fruit of the Spirit, self-control.

It is no accident that self-control comes at the end of the list – not that it is the least important but arguably the *most* important. Without the quality of self-control, to try and be fruitful in all the other areas would be very difficult, if not impossible.

How can we be gentle if we have no self-control, and we get angry at every situation?

How can we be faithful, if we show no self-control, and we give into temptation at every turn?

You see, we could go through the eight qualities, and we would discover that without self-control, we would not be able to demonstrate those fruits in our lives.

But, and it is a big but, where does self-control come from?

Like all the Fruits, it comes from God. It is a gift given to us through Christ. Every Fruit belongs to Jesus. If we want a picture of what Jesus looks like, this is it. He is the nine Fruits put together as one. When we look at the life of Jesus, self-control is there at the heart of his ministry and life.

It begins in the desert with the devil, 40 days he endured starvation and after 40 days the devil came to him to tempt him. 40 days without food and the first temptation was to turn stones into bread. Now it took great self-control not to give into this temptation.

I would struggle after one day, but Jesus faces this temptation straight in the face and he says *the Word of God says....* Jesus remained in control of the situation, why? Because his Father's word was above and beyond all things. *The Word of God says....* Can we say that, when we are tempted to be faithless, *the Word of God says?* The beginning of wisdom is the fear of

the Lord. You see, Jesus knew that the Word of God was his guide and his strength. He had reverence for it. He listened to it, literally, and if Jesus did this, should we not also?

*When we walk with the Lord
In the light of His Word,
What a glory He sheds on our way;
While we do His good will,
He abides with us still,
And with all who will trust and obey.*

*Trust and obey,
For there's no other way
To be happy in Jesus,
But to trust and obey.*

...goes the great old hymn.

Self-control is about trusting and obeying the Lord.

This is where Mary found her self-control. Listen to her words in response to the angel who gave her the sensational news that she would give birth to the Son of God, *"I am the Lord's servant. May it be as you have said"*.

"I am the Lord's servant." This is how we discover self-control. When we know that at our very best, and our very worst, we are the Lord's servant.

When we come under the direction of the Lord, when we recognise him to be our master...everything changes.

Self-control for a Christian is to be under the Lord's control. It is when we are willing to submit to the Lord's guidance for our lives.

So, what has hope to do with self-control?

It has everything because Mary was given hope. She was told that the Son of God, was to be born from her womb. In the Magnificat, she speaks of what the Son will do for Israel.

This hope led Mary to self-control, to see herself as a servant of the Lord and that her life was all about serving God, first and foremost. She was to be the one who carried the message of hope, the Word made flesh.

In the darkness of her times, she gave life to a baby who would grow up to be the Saviour of the world, and she believed this, and so she saw herself as a servant of the Lord. To be a servant is to be under the control of another, and so Mary placed herself under God's control.

In the coldness of the dark night of Bethlehem, a new baby is born, who would be a sign, symbol and seal of hope and renewal; this new baby, who would grow to be a man, would bring hope to the world. He would bring renewal – a renewal of human beings. He would bring forgiveness and a new beginning for those who would receive it. Hope is born in the stable and renewal is on its way.

But Christ's birth also brought renewal of people's hearts. His spirit would reside in those who follow him and his spirit would transform darkness into light. Enemies would become friends – forgiveness and mercy would be offered to all. People would be valued, women would receive their true honour, and children would be given a new status.

Jesus's birth brought the hope of renewal of creation, the desert would become as green as the mountains of Lebanon and the wasteland would rejoice and blossom with spring crocuses.

This baby would bring hope to the world and for us as Christians, we are called to walk in the path of hope with self-control. But to walk in this path requires the Spirit of our Lord who will bring to our hearts his gift of self-control, and self-control will work through our lives and bring all the other Fruits to blossom on the tree.

So, we end our journey of the Fruits of the Spirit, on the day that the church year begins, and we begin with self-control and hope for the future. May you allow Christ's gift of self-control to give you hope for the days that lie ahead and may you know him to be true to his word, that indeed he is the light of the world, and that light has shone in the darkness and that darkness will never triumph over the light.

Amen