

The Fourth Fruit of the Spirit is Long-suffering

On Monday morning television there was an interview about a vaccine for Covid-19, and being interviewed was the former deputy chief medical officer for England, Rev Prof Gina Radford.

On June 2019, she joined the Diocese of Exeter as the new Team Vicar in the Dart and Avon Mission Community.

Revd. Prof Radford describes herself as a life-long Christian.

She heard about the vacant position in Devon from an old friend and that was “all it took”.

She believes skills from her previous life in medicine will be very useful in her new role, and says even before she trained as a doctor she felt a need and desire to do more of God’s work.

She said, “Having spent a working life helping others both physically and mentally, now is the time to minister to their spiritual needs.”

Kate Garraway said to her, *you have a very interesting perspective on the current situation* – implying that her medical and theological knowledge would be of great insight, and Kate said, *I would love to visit your church and hear your sermons*, and Prof Gina replied, *you can do this by going online and listening to them*. That’s what I did, I went on to listen to her latest sermon, perhaps expecting to hear her speak on our current situation, but her message was simple and precise, it was the gospel of Jesus. It was a message of challenge and hope to trust in him and accept his invitation.

She is an educated and experienced woman, who knows the importance of our spiritual needs, and she is ministering to her congregation in a way that will help them through this pandemic by simply trusting in Jesus.

I tell you this story because Prof Gina has been on a life journey through her experience has a doctor, prof, medical officer and now vicar, and God has been working patiently in her life through all these different stages, and has taken her to the point where she is standing up and sharing his message of love and grace with others. God has been patient with her and preparing her for this time.

That ties in with our message today, God is patient and long-suffering and like the potter in Jeremiah's vision, he doesn't give up on us.

The prophet is led to the potter's house where he carefully watches the potter at work at his wheel. He sees him taking a lump of clay from the mass that lies beside his hand, and watches him kneading the clay to get rid of all the bubbles and then place it on the wheel, and rapidly revolving it around the wheel as his foot operates the treadle.

From that moment his hands are at work, as the potter skilfully begins to bring to life his pot. It is appearing to be a beautiful vessel, but just at the moment of completion there is a flaw on the clay and it collapses, a shapeless ruin, broken on the wheel, and some falls on the floor.

The prophet would have expected the potter to take another piece of clay and start again but no, he gathers up the broken pot, he pulls together all the pieces and he begins afresh and makes it into another pot.

What a wonderful vision of the long-suffering God who loves us!

When I say *long-suffering* what does it conjure up in your mind?

The fourth fruit of the Spirit is long-suffering, that is the KJV word that we have modernised into the word patience; with the word patience we still get the idea that being a Christian and follower of Jesus we need to be patient.

We are a work in progress. Like the first pot we have many faults and cracks. We are capable of being broken and wounded.

But there is something in the word long-suffering that hits the mark because it points back to God, the God that we discover in the pages of Scripture is long-suffering.

He suffers long despite our mistakes. He is the patient God. There is a verse that says this, “The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, plenteous in mercy” – Psalm 103 v8.

This is the picture that we have of God throughout the Scriptures. He is patient. He doesn't give up on us. When the first pot crumbles, he doesn't throw it away – he begins again and that's the Christian God and the Christian narrative.

He is long-suffering, like the Father in the story of the Prodigal Son, he doesn't give up hoping or willing for the day that the son will return.

He waits patiently, he is long-suffering.

God isn't really in a hurry. He is patient.

Yes, we are always in a hurry.

There is an excellent book that I'm reading at the moment, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*. I have been reading it for a month now, because I'm not in a hurry to finish it.

We scamper here and there, like the Scarlet Pimpernel, doing this and that, continually looking at our watch or looking at Facebook or our computers. We are controlled by time, whether that's a doctors' appointment or simply our meals during the day. We always seem to be in a hurry, but God's not, and I want us to grasp this important point this morning, that God is not in a hurry.

So let's catch our breath and slow down.

I think one of the reasons that prevents people from coming to church is that they haven't time for it, because they are always in a hurry. To take 2 or 3 hours from their busy schedule would seem ridiculous, when they could fill those hours with other things.

But, do you know, these are the best hours of the week, for you slow down, you take your foot off the accelerator, even if you have to listen to the preacher, it's a moment for you to fix your attention on the Creator, to slow down your rhythm.

Last week, I was on a beautiful beach called Sandhead, it was a glorious autumn day and the sea was an amazing colour of blue, the sun was shining, and I was surrounded by nature, and there on the beach I came across this stone.

I didn't like to take it from the beach, but I saw so many that I thought the beach wouldn't miss one, and I said *God, I'll use this stone to speak about you and if I have a conscience about taking the stone, I will return it, to the exact same spot, next time that I'm there.*

As I picked up the stone, I marvelled at it.

It spoke to me on different levels.

Firstly, it said to me, *I'm old, really old. I have been around a lot longer than you. In fact, I've been here for millions of years.* That really humbled me; here I am walking over this stony beach and the stones are telling me that I am really only a breath, only like grass, and a flower on the field, and tomorrow a wind could blow and I'm gone, and this place knows me no more. The reality is that our lives are short when we compare them with even the environment surrounding us. I marvel at the trees round about us here, much older than us, and they will be around for a long time yet.

This stone has also had its edges rubbed off. It's been under the sea, dear knows for how long. It has seen different time zones, the Ice Age being one of them, but it is now a beautifully honed stone, and over a long period of time its edges have been eroded, and it is now so smooth, with not a rough edge on it. It has endured the passing of time and will still be around on this beautiful planet until the end of this age.

The stone has many shapes, the one I like is the shape of a fish. Nature has decided to shape it in this way.

The point that I'm making is that this has happened over countless years and this for me points to the nature and character of God.

He is long-suffering and, after all, God doesn't have a watch. He is outside of time. God is eternal and there is nothing that constrains God.

God is a Spirit but he did enter time once. He came to us, to experience our time-constrained world; He came to us to suffer and endure and experience what we humans are about; He came to us as the long-suffering servant who suffered when he was here on earth.

God knows what we feel, and why we feel it, because he suffered with us. The long-suffering God is with us, and around us, and about us, and that is what Jeremiah is telling his people and us this morning, for his vision is timeless and it speaks into our lives today.

God is at work in our lives. We are after all broken people. God created this world perfect and he gave us the opportunity to look after it, but a fault developed in the material that he made, and into this planet came a deadly virus – not of a germ but of what we call sin – a virus that spread and infected the whole world, that the plan that God had of people living together in love and harmony quickly descended into hatred and division, and sadly this is the picture that we often see of God's world.

But God being the loving potter doesn't give up on us and he takes our sin-filled lives and puts them onto his wheel, and begins again to make us into the image of his original plan, and that plan was to reflect the grace and love of his Son Jesus Christ.

So, God gives us the opportunity to start again, to put our broken lives onto his wheel, and to allow him to delicately make us into a vessel of his choice of use.

So, the fourth fruit of the spirit is patience, long-suffering for, like all the fruits, this reflects the nature of God and his Son Jesus Christ. When God puts us on his wheel, to remake us, he does so by his Spirit, and his Spirit is at work in our lives, changing us and making us into objects of beauty.

It's not an instant process, but it is a process that takes time, in fact a lifetime.

When the clay has received its final shape from the potter's hands, it must be baked in the kiln to keep it; and even then it is not finished, for whatever colours are put in must be rendered by fire. It is said that what must become gold in the finished article is a smudge of dark liquid before the fire is applied, and that the first two or three applications of heat obliterate all traces of colour, which has to be renewed again and again.

So, in God's dealings with his people, the moulding hand has no sooner finished its work than it plunges the clay into the fiery trial of pain or temptation. But let patience and long-suffering do its work and the end result will be a life fit for the Master's purpose, a life that lasts for all eternity.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Amen