**July: *The Pattern of our Lives***

Welcome to the July Prayer, and the 11th in our series of 12. Each month we will explore different themes and different ways of praying which we hope you will find helpful as ways in which to encounter God. The Provincial Spirituality Group in the Church in Wales.

**Introduction**

July is a time when our gardens are often at their best. Our planting and tending have led to growth and fruit is beginning to form. We are in ‘ordinary’ time in our churches. Our priests wear green - a colour of growth. The theme of this month is that of flourishing. We ask the questions, ‘How might our lives truly flourish and bear fruit?’ What do we need to grow in our spiritual lives?

The way of prayer we are introducing this month isn’t so much a way of praying as a way of living. It is an encouragement to us to think about having a ‘rule of life’, an intentional pattern to our lives - especially our spiritual lives - which helps us flourish.

**Opening Prayer**

Gracious God,

I hunger for many things - Some of them are good for me,

some of them are not - although the taste may be appealing.

Help me to choose those things which truly satisfy.

Help me to know what is good for my mind, body and soul.

Fill my soul with your goodness so that I might taste eternal life.

Amen.

**Reflection:**

It is very difficult to grow fruit of all kinds here in Wales but it is not impossible. Although it would be impossible if we decided to leave nature to itself! Our environment is not suitable for many fruits to grow and thrive. To produce a variety of fruit, we need to create an environment for growth. We need to supply water and food in the right amounts. We need to plant in the right position for that particular plant. We need to prune, to watch out for insects or disease that would harm the plant. We need to keep weeds at bay.

We need to garden regularly to get good results and each season has its rhythms. Sometimes gardening will be a joy, sometimes it will feel like a chore. But the end result is worth it.

If we hope to see our spiritual lives flourish, and to grow as human beings, we similarly need to create the right environment for growth. We need to give our souls what they need for healthy growth. We need to notice what helps us flourish and what might be harmful, like insects or disease in plants.

Just as growing gardens need regular attention, so does spiritual growth. Like gardening, this regular attention will sometimes give us joy and sometimes feel like a chore. The spiritual life also has its seasons and each season will have its own rhythms.

**Bible Reading: Galatians 5:22b-26**

‘the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another’.

**Reflection:**

What can we do in our lives that will provide the right conditions for growing such spiritual fruit? Christian tradition suggests some elements which are important if our lives of faith are to flourish and bear fruit - things which create an environment for growth.

These include:

* Gathering together for worship, including receiving communion regularly;
* Prayer
* Reading and studying scripture;
* Thinking about how we use our money and other resources (such as our time, our houses);
* Asking God’s forgiveness.
* Thanksgiving
* Receiving help from other Christians (for example, through spiritual direction).
* Fasting

The practice of these things tends to change over time. So, although some Christians do fast, for example, for many of us this has become giving up something in Lent. On the other hand, today we realise more fully the importance of caring for creation and promoting diversity. So you might like to include these in your pattern of life.

When we put together a ‘rule of life’ we make a definite decision about making sure that those things which help us grow are a part of our lives. If you find the term ‘rule of life’ off-putting, thinking about it as a pattern, or rhythm of life can help. It is not a rule imposed for the sake of it but a pattern which helps us flourish.

You can include other things in your pattern of life that help you and others to flourish such as:

* time for rest and holiday;
* making time for family and friends
* Looking after your body by eating well, sleeping well and exercising;
* taking time away for a retreat;

There will be things that you are already doing and the first step is to recognise and note these. It can be very encouraging to realise that our life already has many of the ingredients that will help us flourish. Then you can add other things that you think will help. Do this prayerfully. It’s best to think about a small change that you might make to help yourself (and others) flourish rather than make an ambitious plan which you won’t keep. Be realistic! Some things will take their place in a seasonal pattern of life. You might decide to attend an Advent quiet day or a Lent Bible study each year for example. Thinking about what you might want in your pattern daily, weekly and annually can be helpful.

You can, of course, include thing that you will try **not** to do if you know that they are unhelpful to you (gorging on social media, for example!). But it’s important that your rule of life is attractive to you rather than a list of ‘don’ts’ that you are unlikely to keep. St Paul describes fruit in a positive way. Jesus tells us to love our neighbours as ourselves - so we need to have self-compassion as a fundamental pattern in our lives.

Your pattern of life will also change with the seasons of your life. If, for example, you have a demanding job and child-care responsibilities, these will take up much of your time. You won’t be able to spend much time helping out on a voluntary basis, or dedicate as much time to prayer as you might if you are retired and children are grown. So it’s a good idea to review your rule of life every so often (maybe once or twice a year).

Example of a simple rule of life:

My pattern of life:

* I will go to church on Sunday and receive communion
* I will pray for a few minutes before going to bed each day. This will include giving thanks for something good in the day.
* I will take time to read the Sunday Bible readings on Saturday.
* I’ll put an extra couple of items in my weekly shop to give to the food bank.
* I’ll think about the week gone by on my way to church so when we say the confession together I’ve got specific things in mind.
* I’ll recycle and try not to buy so many clothes that I really don’t need.
* I’ll go for a walk a couple of times a week and remember to thank God for the beauty of nature when I walk.
* I’ll give £x to St Gloria’s church each week and £x to HelpThem charity.
* I’ll take part in the Lent group each year.

**Prayer**

God of abundant life,

Give us the desire to grow in the fruit of your spirit.

Give us eyes to see those things will help us.
Give us ears to listen to your voice.

Give us hearts to love you more.

Give us hands which show that love in action.

And when all of this feels like a chore, keep us faithful to you,
knowing that you have kept faith with us - even to the cross.

So may the fruits of your Holy Spirit feed a world which hungers for your love.

Amen.

**Resources:**

Search for ‘Fill your hearts with joy and gladness’ by Timothy Dudley-Smith.

Search for ‘Ode to Joy’ by Beethoven.

Suggested Reading:

*‘The City is my Monastery’ – A Contemporary Rule of Life by Richard Carter.*

*‘Finding Sanctuary’ by Christopher Jamison.*

*‘Finding Happiness’ by Christopher Jamison.*

**Next Month**

We hope that you have found these reflections and prayers helpful, and they may of course need thinking about and praying more than once. Next month our theme is holidays and praying in silence.