

Monday 26th July 2021: Psalms 27 & 30; Ezekiel 28:1-19; James 2:1-13

Right now there is a man who has been coming on and off to the church for worship over the last year and a half. He looks like he doesn't care about his appearance. His hair is wild with a wild beard. He has a belly, and his pants don't hitch up over his belly. He wears old ragged looking t-shirts that don't completely cover his rounded flesh. He has very poor social skills. He had an abusive father, an absent mother, was in the "slow" class in school, and has gone from one manual labour job to another over his working years (he is 45 years old). He is a single person.

When he first came to the church, people were mildly friendly to him. But when he kept coming, and when he started coming to events, Bible studies, and wanted to help with service projects, I noticed people keeping their distance, ignoring him, etc. I have been interested and frustrated at what I have observed. So, it was okay when he was just a strange visitor - but it's not okay when he says, "I want to be part of this family." Granted, he is definitely not the usual kind of guy, who sits in the pews in my rural congregation, and I personally feel a bit uncomfortable around him - but I believe God is stretching this body of believers to truly become the body of Christ.

In the context of our reading from James this morning, I wonder how this story above (a true story, but not my story) might resonate with us.

How do we avoid showing favouritism? It is a huge challenge, after all our societal structures seems to be based on favouritism, and giving the place of honour to the rich, whilst leaving the poor out in the cold.

If we saw the rich being favoured ahead of the poor as they came into church on a Sunday morning, as detailed by James in verses 1-4, we might easily identify favouritism taking place and hopefully we would do something about it.

But what about when that person keeps coming back. When they are still smelly, week after week, would the welcome continue to be extended, or would there be a sense that they are not so welcome in our community as we might at first have led them believe.

I hope not.

But perhaps this morning, as we ponder these words on favourism from James alongside the story above, we can take time to see where this passage offers us a challenge and ask ourselves, do we really 'Love our neighbour as ourself.'

May God bless you

Heather

Psalm 36, Ezekiel 33: 1-20, James 2: 14-end

“faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” James 2: 17

“Faith without works” is perhaps the phrase that the letter of James is most remembered for!

James, the brother of Jesus, whom he always refers to as Lord, most likely became a Christian after witnessing the resurrection, and later became a leader in the church at Jerusalem. His letter was written to a general group of the early church, scattered abroad, the diaspora, and covers very practical issues about the Christian life, testing, endurance, wisdom, prayer, faith, wealth, the tongue, and Christianity in action. James’ idea of a Christian is one who sets him/herself to discover God’s standards and to live them out wherever they are.

Many of the early Christians were Jews, bound by a very strict legal code of conduct, and there were lots of questions about how to handle the freedoms inherent in their new faith. If salvation is God’s free gift, does it really matter how we live? Very much so, James insists. Genuine faith in Christ always spills over into everyday life. Faith is a multi- dimensional relationship – with God, within ourselves, and with each other, both those in the church and those in the community, and the world which we all share. Christian faith and Christian standards and values affect every aspect of our lives.

A person who believes in God, but doesn’t allow that to impact on actions on behalf of those in need is technically a Christian, but not fully alive to the richness of faith. Our worship and our work on behalf of those who are vulnerable, poor or in any kind of need, are not alternatives, writes Peter Graystone. Both are imperative as expressions of our relationship with God. Faith that stops at words is not enough.

Martin Luther called this section of James letter, “the epistle of straw”, because he felt it contradicted Paul’s theology in Romans where he speaks of being justified by faith alone. This may be just a different viewpoint. James would agree with Paul that we are saved by faith and faith alone, but that where faith is present, good works will follow.

We are not saved by good works; we are saved to do good works.

We find opportunities to do these wherever we are – at home, in our workplaces, in our churches, in our communities, and our world – to follow the example of Jesus in serving others.

In our modern materialistic world, there are always temptations to compromise, to let the values of the world nibble away at what we truly believe, and how we behave. No different in James’ day! The early Christians needed the letter of James, and so do we.

A prayer by Nick Fawcett:

Gracious God, thank you that you didn’t just talk about love, but showed it in action, entering our world in Christ, and enduring suffering and death to bring us life. Thank you that through him you strengthened the weak, healed the sick, and redeemed the lost, bringing good news to the poor, hope to the oppressed, and acceptance to the outcast. Help us in turn to live in such a way that our deeds and words are one, that what we profess with our lips we express in our lives.

Teach us your way, and help us to follow. Through our service and witness, Lord, reach out to others in turn, Amen
God bless you in your work!

James 3

Reflection July 28th 2021



It's the little things in life that make a difference.

James teaches this lesson as he writes about the tongue. It is not very big, but it has enormous power.

'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me'.

Not so.

I remember when I was seven, my mother took me to a department store to buy me a pair of jodhpurs for my riding lessons. The shop assistant took a tape measure and measured my waist and hips and said "She's very broad in the beam, isn't she?". Those words have obviously stuck with me and reduced me nearly to Anorexia as a teenager. Careless words. Not meant nastily, but careless.

Our words can be a powerful force for good or for ill.

We need to be careful about the news we share concerning others. Someone said, "There is only one thing as difficult as unscrambling an egg, and that's unspreading a rumour." Gossip is destructive, and it is subtle. Someone begins a conversation: "Did you hear?" Before you know it, you're caught up in gossip.

The human tongue accounts for under 1% of our body mass, but punches well above its weight, because we use our tongues to speak, and our words can have huge effects.

The tongue can be the most destructive weapon on earth; its misuse has damaged more lives than all the weapons of war or disease in the world.

The tongue can bring some of life's greatest joys; like someone telling you they "love you," or it can bring some of life's greatest pains; like someone telling you they "hate you!" or that you're fat, or ugly, or the wrong colour, need I go on?

So, let's think carefully before we speak and make sure our tongues are instruments of goodness, not weapons of destruction!

Angie

Reflections for Thursday 29th July

Psalm 37

Old Testament: Ezekiel 34: 1-16

New Testament: James 4: 1-12

Theme: God cares for us, He is the Good Shepherd and we are called to live in harmony

God cares for you: Psalm 37 is a Psalm attributed to David calling for calm and composure but focusing on God and offering advice to stick with God. The Psalm is a contemplative Psalm which shows the world as an overwhelming place where there are people of all sorts and of all sorts of practises which appear to add the value and enjoyment of life. The Psalm should not be understood to say that life should not have any enjoyment and fun, but what it is saying is that these should not come out of unethical practises which can be enchanting and appear lucretius, but in the long run can be damaging ones relationship with God. "Do not fret because of those who are evil or be envious of those who do wrong." [Verse 1] Instead the Psalm calls for a focus to be on God and trust in God even against all odds. He starts by saying, "Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. [Verse 3-15] He also advises people to be satisfied with what one has, rather than use dishonest ways to achieve, and he starts with the words, "Better the little that the righteous have". [Verses 16 -end] and some of this comes out of his own experience when he says, "I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread. They are always generous and lend freely; their children will be a blessing". [Verses 25-25]

The Good Shepherd: Ezekiel 34: 1-16. This passage echoes the theme of God as the Good Shepherd. Ezekiel was born and brought up in Jerusalem during turbulent times and upheaval caused by the Babylonian invasion. This metaphor of God as the Shepherd of Israel began before his time, when the people of Israel left Egypt and travelled for 40 years in the wilderness under God's care, provision and protection through Moses and Aaron, then Joshua, then the Judges followed by the kings. And now as Ezekiel announces this prophecy, they have all abandoned God. The priests and the prophets are no longer representing the God who took them through the ups and downs and they have adopted a completely different alliance. The very things they were called not to do they are now doing, they have slowly drifted away and now their conscious has become numb with no sense of remorse. This situation has become institutional and all the structures support it including the leaders and even those who represent God such as the priests and the prophets. Ezekiel is now declaring that the only hope for them is to turn to the Good Shepherd who has not abandoned his own, who remains faithful and has kept them so far. In verse 11 Ezekiel makes the statement from God's word saying, "For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them." He closes in verse 16 saying, "I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice." This was fulfilled by the coming of Jesus the Good Shepherd.

Live in harmony: James 4: 1-12: James is addressing the temptation which comes out of quarrels and forms quarrels. The church was a place where people from different backgrounds come to form a community such as that of a family, and James points out on the damaging effects of quarrelling due to peoples differences. He also gives caution for people to avoid those things which could be the root causes for quarrels.

Friday July 30th 2021



Today we are asked to remember William Wilberforce. **William Wilberforce** (24 August 1759 - 29 July 1833)^[1] was a British politician and philanthropist and a leader of the movement to abolish the slave trade. He was born in Kingston upon Hull, Yorkshire and began his political career in 1780, eventually becoming an Independent Member of Parliament for Yorkshire (1784-1812). In 1785, he became an evangelical Christian, which resulted in major changes to his lifestyle and a lifelong concern for reform.

In 1787, he came into contact with Thomas Clarkson and a group of anti-slave-trade activists. They persuaded Wilberforce to take on the cause of abolition, and he soon became one of the leading English abolitionists. He headed the parliamentary campaign against the British slave trade for twenty years until the passage of the Slave Trade Act of 1807

Wilberforce was convinced of the importance of religion, morality and education. He championed causes and campaigns such as the Society for the Suppression of Vice, British missionary work in India, the creation of a free colony in Sierra Leone, the foundation of the Church Mission Society, and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. His underlying conservatism led him to support politically and socially controversial legislation, and resulted in criticism that he was ignoring injustices at home while campaigning for the enslaved abroad.

In later years, Wilberforce supported the campaign for the complete abolition of slavery, and continued his involvement after 1826, when he resigned from Parliament because of his failing health. That campaign led to the Slavery Abolition Act 1833, which abolished slavery in most of the British Empire. Wilberforce died just three days after hearing that the passage of the Act through Parliament was assured. He was buried in Westminster Abbey.

As we reflect upon what has happened in the past year - the murder of George Floyd, the 'Black Lives Matter' Campaign and the 'Taking the Knee' gesture in sport - we would do well to remember what Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians **There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus**'.

Take Care

God Bless

xxGilxx

Reflection 31st July (Elisabeth)

(Psalm 42. Ezekiel 36:16-36) James 5:7-20

The letter of James was famously rather dismissed by Martin Luther, perhaps because a superficial reading of parts of it can lead the reader to think it is possible to earn salvation by what "good works" we do. Salvation is not earned, though, but is through the saving work of Christ on the cross, received by faith, as Luther himself stressed.

James' letter is well worth reading, and it can be challenging, as it gives good advice for Christian living, and especially for living as a fellowship of Christians. We are to care for each other, encourage each other, and pray for each other. He counsels patience (vs 7 and 10), and perseverance (v 11). And he warns against grumbling in the church (v 9) - this, he says, leads to be being judged by the divine Judge. This recalls Jesus' warning about being judgemental (Matthew 7:1), "Do not judge, or you too will be judged". And in John 8:11, when the woman caught in adultery was about to be stoned to death, Jesus said "if any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone". Of course none of them could!

This seems particularly relevant at the moment, as we are still in the pandemic, but with most legal covid restrictions lifted. Though caution is urged, people behave in different ways for various reasons. How should we behave as a church community as we learn to live with the virus while cases are still rising? We may have different views on such things as mask wearing and have different levels of confidence in going out and mixing with other people. And some people are more vulnerable if infected than others.

Singing is now allowed, and in large airy church buildings this is unlikely to be a problem, but not everyone may feel able to join in just yet. It's very easy to look at reports of excited football fans or night club goers crowded together and criticise them (especially if it's not the kind of thing we would enjoy in normal times anyway!). But we have to try to avoid the temptation to judge people - we don't know them as God does. He knows everyone from the inside out, with all their hopes and fears, their strengths and weaknesses.

As a Christian community we are called to love and value each other, to respect our differences in outlook and situation, and to pray for each other's needs and concerns. Above all we are to encourage each other in our growth in faith, out of which our service to God comes. May we grow together as we live through these next weeks and months.