

SERMON 2 SEPTEMBER 2018

I wonder how you feel if you listen to the news every evening or read the paper every day. I suspect that many of us are caught up in the dilemma of having had enough of all the dramas and yet knowing that we ought to be aware of what is going on – if we can keep up. I am back to Karl Barth again and his strong belief that any preacher should have the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other.

The institutional churches have their own dramas. We cannot avoid being caught up in scandals and controversies around sexual abuse, hierarchy, power and money, as, sadly, that is what many who are outside the Church read about, see and base their judgements on. Like many other churches, we now have our electronic notice board that, hopefully, gives a different kind of message about concern for people, for the community, the society, the world. There may be no way of knowing how people may respond, but the messages are out there.

We do our bit, don't we! And many of us have been doing that for decades. So, it is hard to witness declining numbers and apparent disinterest and even anger all around. Some see this as a painful but important time of change because, even though we may not be able to imagine what the future holds, we believe that God is in that future and that the Holy Spirit is always recreating new things. In such a time, it is crucial to recall what it is that Christ's life, death and resurrection calls us to. To ground ourselves in his Way, not merely for our own sakes, but for the integrity of whatever it is that comes after.

Today's readings are important. From both James and from Mark we have heard words that address some fundamental things about the way in which we live. If you have read the cover-page of today's order of service and have seen the theme of this time of worship, you will see that I am intending to focus on "Communicating the Gospel: living the faith." It was because of the readings and because of what we see in the world around us that I felt drawn to this.

Although it is described as an epistle, this is not, in fact, what James' writing is. James, the brother of Jesus, was the leader of the Church in Jerusalem. He was known as a wise person, someone to whom the fledgling Christian community and its individuals turned for advice. In the end, evidently, he put his teachings together into a short book which was then sent out. It is not addressed, as other epistles are, to a particular group or community, but "to the twelve tribes scattered amongst the nations". The church in Jerusalem was Jewish and James was writing for Jewish believers, unlike Paul, whose mission was to Jew and Gentile alike. Paul had had a disagreement with James and Peter about his mission to the Gentiles, a disagreement that they resolved. So James' writing is a bit different. It has to be said that Luther really dislikes this book because it doesn't mention the name of Jesus at all. James does, rather, concentrate on questions of daily living for the Christian community as they committed themselves to following Jesus' way. How were they to live faithfully in their own society? For James, faith must be worked out in actions. It should inform everything Christians do, how we speak and how we relate to one another. This is a different emphasis from Luther's justification by faith through grace alone. But this is not an either/or matter for us. I am sure we can take hold of both these approaches.

In a sceptical and often negative society, how we behave as Christians is of enormous importance. We are none of us perfect. We are made of the same stuff as our neighbours who may be atheist, agnostic, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Sikh or whatever else in this multi-cultural city we share. We may share many of the same values. James addressed the Christians in Jerusalem as "the first-fruits of all God created". Their faith in Christ was a very new thing, a departure from the old. Are we still first-fruits or are we pretty old fruits by now? Maybe there is a sense in which, through the Holy Spirit, we should always be the first-fruits of a new creation because God's Spirit is always renewing and leading on. Grounded in Christ, we are always being called on, to continue to discover what it means to live as Christ's followers. We know that, but we may not always pause to think what makes the difference for us. So, in these challenging times, it is good to hear such basic exhortations such as these we find in James' writing: about anger, about immorality, about holding onto what we have learned and acting on it, and then discovering the great freedom and blessing that

flows from that. James says that those who consider themselves religious but don't keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves and their religion is worthless. Would anyone want to Twitter that? Actually, as an aside, what is translated as "religion" really relates to worship. "Religion" is not a word that was used in those times and doesn't appear anywhere else in translations. The passage we heard today ends: "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. It's all very well hearing this. How we live it is another matter. But let's hold that to one side for a moment while we turn to the gospel.

We are back with Mark again after a few weeks hearing from John and his lofty, inspiring passages such as "I am the bread of life", and "I am the living water." Mark now seems very down to earth as we hear about Jesus' disciples eating with unwashed hands and thereby offending the Pharisees. Then we heard Jesus' response to their criticism, saying that nothing outside a person that enters them can defile them, but what comes out of a person can: evil thoughts, immoral behaviour, deceit, lewdness, arrogance and folly to name a few things Jesus lists. This is not just about breaking the codes of conduct about cleanliness. It is more about how tradition and ritual can lead to a focus that is restrictive; how the important things are obscured and, indeed, lost. What Mark is pointing to is the way in which Scripture can be misused. It is notable that Matthew and Luke both pick up this story from Mark but they both change his emphasis as they record Jesus saying that no jot or tittle will be lost from the Law. Mark's Jesus is saying something much more direct about the new ways in which Jesus defines things, the new ways in which people are set free from some of the weight and restrictions that can be a block to the fullness of life.

Jesus is talking about a cleanliness that comes from a right spirit, right attitude, right relationships and about the dangers that come from hurtful language and behaviour. It emphasizes that, before anything else, the heart has to be in the right place. That comes from a spirit focussed on what is good, true, wise and loving, the things of God. I came across this post on Facebook from Mindful Christianity. It seems to clarify what all this means as we think about what it means to communicate the gospel and live in

faith. “Once a man was asked, ‘what do you gain by regularly praying to God?’. The man replied, ‘nothing...but let me tell you what I lost: anger, ego, greed, depression, insecurity and fear of death.’ Sometimes the answer to our prayers is not gaining but losing; which ultimately is gain”. These readings about living in a Christian way could well be seen as calling us to look again to Christ and to centre ourselves on and in him.

Our failures to live in the ways of love and faith are always with us. We confess our weakness Sunday by Sunday, and are reminded that it is God’s grace, compassion and mercy that allows us to get up and keep going. When we wonder what it is that may define us as Christians amongst all the many good people who are our neighbours, who may well hold similar values about truth telling and moral behaviour, surely it is this: that we are rooted and grounded in Christ; that have heard his call to us to follow in his way and that we try as best we can. This cannot be a remote un-relational thing. If we are to live this, then we can only do it because we know that what we do matters to God by whom we are held in love, whoever we are. We rediscover that, time and again, in prayer – those prayers that often help us to let go of the things that weigh us down, that lead us to anger and selfishness. When, in our humanness we fail to live in love and peace with one another, we are still called back, time and again, to turn and face God, to confess our failings and to accept the forgiveness we are freely offered. This is the gospel that our living may then communicate. It may not be easy in the world out there, but we are a part of this world. It is God’s world. As part of Christ’s community of faith in this place we are know we are strengthened as we come together to learn, to share, to grow. We do this not least as we are welcomed to the table where the very ordinary things of life are offered and become holy before Christ, and we receive the symbols of his life, freely given, broken for the wholeness and healing of all so that we might follow in his Way. That world needs to learn that way of humility, compassion and the strong stand for justice and for peace. The whole creation need us to take this seriously, for God’s sake. Amen.