

Sermon for 22nd September 2024 – Year B – Proper 20

Preached at St Serf Shettleston

James 3:13-4.3,7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

Sermon

The letter of James was infamously described as an ‘epistle of straw’ by the reformer Martin Luther, who saw it as full of strict behavioural rules and rather devoid of the liberating grace of Jesus Christ. Jesus is barely mentioned by James, and he doesn’t talk about the Resurrection or prioritise faith in Jesus as the most important part of Christian life, as Luther would have preferred. Instead, James argues that it’s always ‘good works’ of charity that prove our faith and the intentions of our heart. By acting selflessly, we demonstrate that we have experienced God’s love for us and trust his instruction.

But despite the many and long arguments between Protestants and Catholics using James to debate the relative importance of faith and good works, the epistle is just as much, if not more, about heavenly wisdom versus earthly wisdom.

In this latter part of chapter 3, James sets about demonstrating the difference between wisdom from heaven, and that which comes from selfish ambition. Wisdom from above is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. This sounds amazing and wonderful, so why does our society, our relationships, and even many of our churches still not exemplify these virtues?

How many of us can sincerely say in our hearts that we are pure, peaceable, gentle, full of mercy, never hypocritical, and so on? I certainly can’t.

Instead, despite our faith in Jesus and our very real and honest desire to become Christlike, we more often act out of secret envy, resentment, frustration that not everything is exactly as we would like it to be.

Of course, it's not just us. Jesus' disciples also suffered from unrelenting self-interest and desire for importance. In our Gospel reading today, they are caught arguing about who among them is the greatest. They're literally walking along with Jesus, and they still can't help letting their personal ambitions get the better of them.

So why isn't this heavenly wisdom more achievable? Why is it that even those of us who listen carefully to the words and teaching of God week in and week out, still struggle to embody what we hear?

James points to the cravings that are at war within us. The cause of our lack of virtue, he says, is that we have been conditioned to crave things we do not really need to flourish as human beings; social status and wealth are the two that Jesus points out repeatedly in his ministry.

It's always tempting for us to gravitate towards the most interesting and important people in the room, especially if we like the idea of being interesting and important ourselves, but Jesus says his followers should seek out the humblest people to welcome and include in God's family, and he presents a little child as an example. Focus on welcoming the humblest rather than the most important people, he says, and you will become like God.

The disciples do not quickly learn this lesson. In the next chapter of Mark's gospel, when people are bringing children to Jesus for his blessing, the disciples still try to turn them away. No wonder Jesus is indignant.

It's all very well though, James pointing out our egotistical nature, and Jesus telling us to become like little children. Neither of them really gives clear

instructions on how to escape being caught up in selfish desires for more of everything.

At the risk of becoming philosophical, I think that lack of clear teaching is because there *is* no direct route from ego-driven behaviour to selflessness. It's not something you can really accomplish step by step by your own efforts – it's kind of an all or nothing thing – like discovering a different way of perceiving the world.

All the great mystics of the Church seem to have realised this. If you read John of the Cross, or Teresa of Avila, or Therese of Lisieux, or the life of Francis of Assisi, or any of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, they all recognise that there is a vast chasm between a life of earthly gain, and heavenly virtue. And that chasm is our ego, our own self-centredness.

In her famous spiritual instruction manual, 'The Interior Castle', Saint Teresa tells us the chasm is impossible to cross in our own strength. It's like trying to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. We can't make ourselves selfless and virtuous because we immediately want to take credit for being selfless and virtuous! We can't become humble because we would immediately want praise for having achieved it. We become proud of being humble. We want a reward for having put others first. And if we don't get what we want, our thin veil of humility quickly becomes a very real resentment.

I wonder if you can imagine what the world might look like if we all for a moment forgot our conflicting ambitions and became true servants of all, without the slightest desire for anything in return – but none of us can make that leap in our own strength. A little bit of self-centredness always sneaks in and poisons the well.

But before we fall into despair, like the disciples who asked, 'Who then can be saved?', both Jesus and James offer what I think is the same solution – which is

to continually draw near to God, to place our attention on God rather than on ourselves.

This is what Jesus does after all, when he goes into the wilderness or up the mountainside to pray, or when he refuses to play the social games of status and authority with the religious leaders or the Romans. “Your will, not mine, be done” was always his deepest prayer. It wasn’t easy for him, either, just because he was the Son of God. Jesus’ sweat was like blood in Gethsemane when he asked the Father if there was another way than having to suffer the Cross. But he persisted in self-sacrifice by focusing on God and the needs of humanity, and not on himself.

Christian contemplatives and mystics throughout history have often taught the same. They teach that there is one purpose in prayer, and that is to wholeheartedly focus all our attention and desire on our heavenly Father. We can only truly forget ourselves by loving Another.

This does take effort and determination, but it is not the effort of following strict religious rules or believing the right beliefs; it is rather the effort of desiring to love God more than anything else we can imagine.

We cannot become like Christ by gradual improvements in our behaviour. There is no step-by-step route to goodness through our own effort. Only God has the power to transform us. All we are called to do is turn our attention towards him in prayer and worship and gratitude, and trust that his love will do the rest.