

A God of Lights

A sermon preached by Revd Viv Bridges on Sunday 29 August 2021 in St Peter's Wolvercote

Refs: Deut 4.1-2, 6-9 James 1.17-27, Mark 7.1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Last week, Richard Peers asked us which was our favourite book of the Bible. Quite difficult on the spur of the moment - we would probably have liked some time to think about it. But I suspect that, with all the time in the world, not many of us would have said James. He comes across as extremely dictatorial and painfully to the point - in today's passage he accuses his listeners of "*sordidness and rank growth of wickedness*" And, by a concentration on the importance of works, he seems to contradict St Paul's message that salvation comes by faith. But neither of these things is completely true – which I think our passage this morning demonstrates.

First we have that beautiful, almost lyrical description of what James believes is God's loving purpose for us all. He assures us that God gives us everything good that we receive and he describes God as Father of lights ... and who never changes. In '*variation and shadow*' James is probably referring to the movement of the planets, the stars, and the sun, the lights in the heavens. But, in spite of the constant change we see in the whole of creation, God is changeless. He is constantly loving, creative.

God fulfils his purpose for us by giving us his word of truth – his gospel of love. when this becomes implanted within us, we are reborn into new life. It was Jewish belief that the first fruits of any harvest (animal or plant) belonged to God, and so when we are reborn, we become His. And then the passage takes on that rather grim tone.

James believes that, when we are reborn, we have to behave differently. We should be humble to receive God's word implanted in us and allow it to affect us totally. It should affect the way we behave. We must do away with that sordidness and wickedness. We must try to lose the tendency to talk too much, and instead become good listeners. We must try to control our temper – not that anger is always wrong - there are situations where anger is the proper response, but we must learn to distinguish those situations from the petty irritations that we so easily feel.

And then, with that phrase "*be doers of the word, not merely hearers*" we begin to see how James is sometimes seen as saying that it is in fact, works that lead to our salvation, but this is to misunderstand him.

St Paul is also sometimes misunderstood. His emphasis is on faith – and he says at times that faith alone can bring salvation but this means true faith, not just an outward proclamation. Just like James, Paul believes that true faith affects everything we do. His wonderful words in Galatians spell out what our behaviour should be if we have true faith, and live in the Spirit. And in Ephesians, he says "We are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life".

So Paul and James believe the same thing, but they talk about them from different angles, and this is basically because of the audiences they are addressing. Paul was often addressing Jewish people for whom salvation still lay in being seen to be doing the right thing ... in being seen to be obeying the rules and regulations of the Jewish Law to the very last letter. The trouble was that many of those rules and regulations had been 'made up' by the scribes since God gave that first Law of Love to Moses. And they had nothing to do with loving God or one's neighbour. Moses had warned the people against precisely that. He told them that God said "*neither add anything to what I command you, nor take away anything*". But on top of adding many 'human' precepts, it was made law that if anyone didn't obey them fastidiously, they could be made outcast.

Those Laws we hear about in our Gospel about ‘washing’ had their roots in hygiene, but became ritualistic, illogical. When Covid started, we were all told to wash our hands thoroughly. This made good sense. It also made sense to do it singing ‘Happy Birthday’ twice, because this gave us a good idea of how long we should wash them. But if the authorities made it a law that we had to do this, and a law that, if we didn’t sing Happy Birthday twice, we would be exiled from the whole of society and condemned to a life of poverty and starvation, we would certainly not think it had anything to do with common sense or love.

But this is rather how it was in Jesus’ day. And it is, of course is what Jesus was constantly condemning most vehemently, as he did in that Gospel reading. Jesus insisted that faith had to be something in the heart. Doing outwardly good things, but hating in the heart, was not true faith. Laws, rules and regulations, were fine if they were to do with loving, but not otherwise. So for Paul, the main task was to move people away from heartless ritualistic obedience to rules and regulation, to a belief in Christ’s new law of love. Faith in Jesus Christ must come first – a true faith embedded in the heart.

For James, his audience had heard this message many times, and some were being tempted to take this emphasis on faith alone too literally. They seemed to think that if they went to those early church meetings, listened to Christ’s word, and said they believed it didn’t matter what they did or how they behaved. James said this is like looking in a mirror, seeing all the blemishes and faults, but going away and forgetting them, doing nothing about them. It’s as if someone today said they were Christian simply because they went to church services, read the Bible, gave to charities. But if they hadn’t taken the words they heard to heart, and still went on hating people, and acting badly when no one could see them then they were not truly Christian. Going to church, reading the Bible, make a good start for a Christian life, but it doesn’t stop there.

True faith, then, means allowing God’s word of truth, his Gospel of love, to implant itself in our hearts and minds and to allow it to overflow into actions and deeds of love. James never said that works alone could bring salvation. Both he and St Paul said that faith that doesn’t overflow into good works isn’t true faith. Jesus taught us that we should serve, and serving involves actions for other people. And he said *“Let your light so shine that others may see your good works to glorify your Father in heaven”*.

James assures us that God is a God of lights, not of shadow or darkness and that he never changes. The circumstances of our own lives change constantly and we see many changes around us that seem very frightening for many of us. But we can be certain that God’s love for us is unconditional, and never changes. His purpose for us is that our lives should, very much, change as a result of his Word implanted in us. That we should have new life in him by listening to God’s word and allowing it to become embedded in our hearts and minds. This happens not just by listening – although that must come first – but by thinking about it, praying about it, understanding what bits of our lives need to change.

We can’t do this ourselves! We can’t suddenly change our characters – become listeners rather than talkers, learn when it’s good to get angry and control ourselves when it’s not! But if we truly wish to change, we must continue to pray about it, then gradually, tiny bit by tiny bit, the Holy Spirit will do that changing. And the Holy Spirit will move us to do good things out of love that give Glory to God.

Amen