

Blessed in their Doing

A sermon preached by Lay Minister Dr Tony Lemon at St. Peter's, Wolvercote on 2 September 2018

Refs: Deuteronomy 4. 1,2, 6-9; James 1.17-end; Mark 7.1-8,14,15,21-23

'But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act – they will be blessed in their doing.' James 1, 25

Some Sundays' readings leave the preacher struggling to find a sermon theme. For today's readings the opposite is true: at least three potential sermons suggested themselves. I'm going to mention two of them briefly but focus on the third.

The first is what I suspect the composers of the lectionary had in mind, because it is the theme which runs through all three readings. This is our relationship with the *laws* or *commandments* of our faith. In Deuteronomy we read of Moses' injunction to heed the statutes and ordinances that he is teaching, to keep the Lord's commandments. This, he says, will show their wisdom and discernment to other nations, who will come to respect them accordingly. James urges people to 'look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere' – words reflected in a prayer we often use 'whose law is perfect freedom': a seeming contradiction but based on a great truth – laws which restrict our freedom in some ways may open up far greater, genuine freedoms in many other ways. And then in our Gospel reading from Mark, Jesus questions the need for some of the traditional laws of the Pharisees concerning washing hands. For centuries the Jews had been surrounded and infiltrated by paganism, both as a cultural force and by military might. What more natural than to reinforce purity codes as cultural codes which distinguished them, emphasising their difference from their neighbours. But now Jews and Gentiles are, in theory at least, brought together in one Christian faith – so what need to emphasise cultural differences? The scriptures spoke of purity and set up codes as signposts to it. Jesus was offering the reality – and when you arrive at the destination you don't need signposts any more.

Secondly, our reading from the letter of James suggests a sermon on the theme of anger: '*be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness*' (1, 19-20). We could look at different kinds of anger, from the anger of a baby crying in frustration to the adult anger that results in loss of self-control and loss of temper, to the anger which is aroused by injustice and produces constructive action in fighting against it – the anger that Paul has in mind when he writes to the Ephesians 'Be angry but do not sin'.

But it is the third theme on which I should like to focus for the rest of this sermon, also arising from James' letter, and it is the theme for which he is best known, namely his emphasis on *doing*, on *works*, as the essence of 'Religion that is pure and undefiled before God' - to care for the orphans and the widows in their distress' (1, 27). This goes to the heart of discussion about *faith and works* which is often portrayed as a key difference between Paul and James. Theologians have poured huge energy into this subject, to which I could not begin to do justice. But it has always seemed to me to be something of a false dichotomy, and perhaps I can explain in simple terms why I feel this to be the case.

I have just returned from a visit to Sweden which focused on the Swedish reformation and the Church of Sweden today. This was strongly influenced by Martin Luther and his doctrine of justification by

faith, which he called 'the chief article of the whole Christian doctrine' – the doctrine of salvation by grace alone through faith in Christ – that which brings the Holy Spirit through the merits of Christ. Luther came to believe that the church was corrupt in its ways and had lost sight of what he saw as some of the central truths of Christianity, especially this doctrine of justification – God's act of declaring a sinner righteous, by faith alone through God's grace. So he began to teach that salvation or redemption is a gift of God's grace, attainable only through faith in Jesus. Perhaps this was a natural reaction to the practice which had grown up in the church of selling 'indulgences' – as if salvation could be bought, and in this automatic fashion established by church authorities. Luther's doctrine of redemption through grace and faith came to be seen as distinguishing many Protestant churches from both the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches.

James sees God working in us through his word – the word which he sees as something that is sown or planted, potentially producing a beautiful harvest. But how does this happen? Every generation in the church must have seen many people who attend church and seem to enjoy what they hear and do, but does it make any real difference? We talk about 'nominal Christians' in relation to those who might describe themselves as Christian but have little or no contact with the church. But James was worried about a problem which was already arising *within* the early church and is with us to this day – he has heard people talking about faith, yet not meaning a rich, lively trust in the living God, but rather an empty affirmation, a bare acknowledgement – a body without a spirit. He was worried not, as we might be, about nominal Christians outside the church – the early church itself was too embryonic, too much a minority body, for that to be a problem. What concerned James was those even within this young church whose affiliation seemed nominal, because it seemed to make no difference to their lives.

Perhaps it may help here to recollect Jesus' own summary of the commandments. We are to love the Lord our God with all our heart and mind, soul and strength. But there is a second part – what James calls 'the royal law' - we are to love our neighbour as ourselves. Essentially, James is insisting on this second clause: this is what he means by 'works', and he is very clear that without works, faith is dead: 'as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead'.

Does this really bring James into conflict with Paul, and indeed with Luther? In part the apparent conflict rests on different concepts of faith. Paul uses the word to mean a true, Jesus-infused faith, whereas James appears in chapter 2 of his letter to be thinking of faith in the more formal Jewish sense of confessing the oneness of God. Such is the faith that James argues must be transfused into Jesus-shaped action if it is to be a faith that is alive and meaningful. Paul himself, in his fiercest letter on faith and works in his letter to the Galatians (5, 6) says 'the only thing that counts is 'faith working through love'. And Luther himself, while insisting that faith is a gift from God, describes it as 'a living, bold trust in God's grace, so certain of God's favour that it would risk death a thousand times trusting in it'. A faith that would risk death – just once, let alone a thousand times – could hardly be described as a faith without works.

So a true and lively faith simply cannot exist without works. This is, I am tempted to say, an instance where common sense and instinct can legitimately short-circuit theological endeavour. We all instinctively know in our hearts that coming to church and accepting the principles of the Christian faith are not enough: if our faith is real, if it is to be a living faith, it must have outcomes – outcomes

reflected in how we live our lives, how we relate to our families and friends, neighbours and communities, how we use all our God-given talents in the service of Christ in the world.

Amen