

FAITH, WORKS AND LOVE

a reflection on the readings for the 12th Sunday after Trinity (3 Sept 2006)

Song of Solomon 2.8-13,
James 1.17-27,
Mark 7.1-8,14,15,21-23

Today, here in Oxford, you and I live in a society in which we have considerable freedom. Sometimes it may not feel like it, with the growing number of forms we have to fill in, health and safety regulations and so on, but we have to admit it's true when we compare our life with life in some other parts of the world - or if we look at the books of the Old Testament that contain the Jewish Law.

Jesus and his apostles – including St Paul – lived in a time when life was dominated by the observance of this law. Jesus continually challenged this way of life, which was one of the main reasons why he was put to death. He always insisted that he had not come to do away with 'the Law', but by this he meant the Law given originally by God himself - a law based on love and mercy which was to be interpreted afresh in different situations. But the Jewish scribes had tried to systematise things by formulating hundreds of petty rules and regulations which governed every aspect of society – social and personal. These were the 'human precepts' which Jesus condemned because observance of them often led to violation of God's law.

We frequently read of Jesus's condemnation of those laws which made it wrong to help people on the Sabbath day, or which excluded people from society, and the verses missed out of the passage from Mark describe the practice of declaring your belongings as 'Corban', or 'devoted to God'. This sounds admirable, but people used it to ring-fence their goods to avoid having to use them to help out their parents when they were in need. This was in clear breach of God's commandment to honour your father and mother.

It's not surprising, then, that St Paul went to great lengths to insist that salvation cannot be earned by doing 'good works' or obeying rules. Rather it is a gift, given through the grace of God alone, to those who turn to Jesus Christ. But some people took this message, that 'Salvation is by faith alone', to mean that it didn't matter what we DO in life - as long as we believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. Of course Paul didn't mean this. By 'faith', he meant TRUE faith, and he frequently lists the practical 'fruits of the Spirit'.

James, the author of today's epistle, felt that people needed reminding that of course what you do matters. He insists that unless faith does produce some change in our lives, it cannot be REAL faith, felt in

the depth of our being. But he makes it quite clear that he's not pointing back to the old 'observances' by insisting that all our actions – including acts of giving - are themselves gifts from God.

James must often have thought of his Lord's words, for Jesus described very clearly the difference between actions that spring from empty faith – spoken but not taken to heart, and those which spring from true faith - from true love of God. Today's Gospel contains such a description and it challenges us to look into our own hearts to see how true our faith is.

When we look at the list, we may be somewhat discouraged – at the very least I know that I find it very easy to get angry, judgmental, to feel self-satisfied or envious, or to speak when I should be listening. But God's promise of forgiveness surely means that we shouldn't dwell on past failures, rather we should look to future possibilities. But we shouldn't do this by looking outwards – to any lists of good deeds. This could lead us back into that trap of 'ticking boxes'. Rather, we should start by looking into our hearts - to our relationship with God.

Our Old Testament reading may seem to have nothing at all to do with the other two readings – it's not meant to be linked – but I think that it has everything to do with them because it tells us about the sort of relationship with God that we should hope for. It comes from that wonderful poem in which the lover sings of love to the beloved. At one stage it was thought not quite proper for the Bible, the imagery of sexual love was felt to be shocking, and today sex is frequently degraded and commercialised. But I believe that we can rejoice in our sexuality, our passions, because they have the potential to be uplifting, joyous. And Jesus Christ was truly human, with human passions.

Of course passionate love isn't only sexual - Jesus wept at Lazarus's grave, and St John of the Cross saw the Song of Solomon as a description of the love between the soul and Christ himself. Christ calls us – you, and me - to love him with the same passionate love that is between the lover and the beloved, between a parent and a child, between very close friends.

We need to pray for courage to respond to Christ's call, because such love takes courage. It risks pain - of separation or of loss, and it risks losing control of part of one's life. But it's worth the risks because it not only makes us want to 'give' to the other, it also makes us humble enough to receive from the other, and we have to receive God's grace and love before we can pass it on.

To develop such a relationship takes time - to get to know God in our hearts. Perhaps by reading about him, talking about him, taking time to be still with him, and by coming to the altar to receive him in Holy Communion or to receive his blessing. But if we do this we shall find ourselves *being* changed. We may – very gradually no doubt! – find ourselves trying to be more patient, more unselfish, more sympathetic towards those we disagree with. We might feel moved to *do* less – so that we can spend more time alone with God, or with our families and friends, for surely, these relationships are part of our loving relationship with God. And, of course, we may find that a growing compassion for others moves us to more acts of kindness. But these 'good works' will be the RESULT of our deepening relationship with God, not ways of achieving it.

I believe, then, that TRUE faith, pure religion, is a response to God's call to you and to me to be his beloved. It is a desire to love Jesus Christ in a way that allows him to change our lives so that all our actions are an overflowing of his passionate love. Amen.

(Revd Viv Bridges)