

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
27th September 2009
Year B

The little letter of James is powerful in its instructions about how to live as a disciple. In just a paragraph today we have a lesson on prayer.

Who should pray: the suffering, the cheerful, the sick, the faithful, the sinful, the righteous (James 9.38-50). In fact everyone for we will not grow spiritually if we neglect listening and speaking to God and developing an intimate relationship with him through prayer. God accepts us and loves us as we are but his intention is not that we stay as we are. He wants us to pray because prayer changes situations, changes people, changes us.

Does prayer work? James asserts that it does: the Lord will raise up the sick, forgive sins, bring healing (James 5. 15-16). James refers to 1 Kings 18 when God answered Elijah's prayer for rain. We can be sceptical about prayer but the gospel for today reinforces our belief in the power of Jesus' name. Mark 9. 38-50 tells of an exorcist who was not a disciple of Jesus casting out demons in the name of Jesus bringing healing and change because of the prayer in Jesus' name. God desires that all should live and so in prayer we tap into the will of God to bring reconciliation and wholeness to all creation.

Pray for one another; intercessory prayer is powerful and effective as illustrated in the story of Esther (Esther 7. 1-6, 9-10; 9.20-22). Righteous Esther prays for her people, the Jews in captivity in Persia. God is not in this story but it is an illustration of the power of petition when a righteous person begs the king for life for others. James says in ch 4.2 'You do not have because you do not ask'. Asking is an act of humility and a recognition of our dependence on the grace of God to give us what we cannot provide ourselves. God is willing to give and we need to be humble enough to ask.

Grace is letting God do things through us It requires us to be absolutely trusting in the Lord rather than worrying or reasoning. If we believe that every good thing comes by the goodness of God, then we can ask with confidence and then give thanks and praise.

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
6th September 20
Year B

Luther denounced James's letter because he thought it lacked good theology. His concern was justification by faith not by good works. But James is an important part of our Bible because it rightly places our behaviour, and how we live our lives as Christians in focus. (James 2.1-10 (11-13) 14-17)

Discrimination against people who are different from ourselves is one of our basic human flaws. We see it in the different treatment of people because of their race, age, status, their money, where they live, their family and so on. James addresses this in his letter.

Discrimination exists in most societies. The Jews were very discriminatory against non-Jews, hence the background to Jesus' perhaps friendly, repartee with the gentile woman in Mark 7. 24-37. Though despised by Jews, the gentile woman had faith and Jesus' concern for her was wholehearted. Likewise he had regard for the man with a speech impediment, someone who would have been unwelcome and perhaps a source of ridicule in that society. James's comments show that discrimination against the poor was a problem in those days too. Partiality and favouritism were common.

In recent decades our laws have been focused on abolishing discrimination against women, the aged, the poor, the disabled, ethnic groups and so on. It has been hard work and some people have been irritated by what they see is political correctness. Nevertheless great strides have been made in relation to these groups of people.

But there is a great way to go yet before our society could be regarded as impartial and just. There is probably a good way for the Anglican Church to go before its behaviours are not discriminatory too. At a local level it is important for each congregation to examine its behaviour and ask, "Whom do we show favour to? Do we welcome people from all backgrounds? Do we value people of every age and gender? Do we offer our support to the whole town or only to Anglicans? We might find that James's words still challenge us today.

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

13th September 2009

Year B

'You can't buy your own salvation' is a common expression of a deep theological concept which is woven through the writings of Paul. Justification is the action of God whereby on the basis of the work of Christ in forging sins through his death on the cross, declares sinners to be free from guilt, forgives their sins, and restores them to favour with God. Justification is entirely God's action and there is nothing we can do through good works to earn our own forgiveness and restoration.

That does not mean that we don't do good works. The debate about this obviously has been long-lasting. Paul and James both were concerned with the question of faith and works; people during the Reformation debated it hotly, largely because of heretical practices which had crept into the Church whereby you could buy an indulgence to obtain the forgiveness of sin. James summed up the position very well by saying that faith without works is dead. (James 2.18-26)

We find favour with God first not by what we do but by who we are. "God of mercy, help us to trust you" (Collect). Trust in God underlies our relationship with God before we actually 'do' anything. In the Gospel (Mark 8.27-38) we see the linking of several ideas: first the recognition of Jesus as the Messiah, second the understanding that messiahship involved suffering service, and thirdly that giving oneself to the service of others is life-giving. The words "in simple trust ..." in hymn I(AHB 519) remind us that a response of trust is the first thing required of us.

Following Jesus is an act of faith, an act of trust, a sacrificial act where you let go of sinful desires and your own selfish will and submit yourself to follow Jesus in his life-giving, self-effacing work. Naturally its outcome will be good works, the work of reconciliation, of unconditional love, of forgiving and healing and restoring and caring and helping.

We cannot follow Jesus and say that all that matters is our worship and our relationship to God. That relationship is flawed and our worship and prayers are defective if they are not completed in action. *Thy will be done* only has meaning when our prayer turns into positive action to fulfil God's will

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

20th September 2009

Year B

Over and over Jesus told the disciples that the way to glory is through total giving of oneself, yet they failed to understand. We see in Mark 9.14-29 that they were still judging achievement and greatness by human not Kingdom standards.

'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all'. Jesus gave an example of this by placing a child in the central position among them. We know little about the treatment of children in Bible times. We know that much was expected of them; obedience and respect of parents were commanded; many worked e.g. tending sheep. But no doubt, as in many societies, they were often ignored, sometimes ill-treated, perhaps ill-fed, and not respected. They were insignificant in politics, religion and the social and economic life of the people.

Jesus' treatment of children, of outcasts, the sick and women showed us that he placed the insignificant, the unfortunate and the oppressed at the centre. How we treat these 'little ones' is a sign of the greatness of a society. Some people have gone overboard in our society in placing children at the centre of things. We see families where children's demands hold families to ransom, where obedience and respect of parents have been forgotten and children's wishes are paramount. This is not what Jesus was saying.

Rather his concern is for the nature of relationships whether adult or children's. The person who is truly great will follow Christ in his servant life, bringing people to wholeness and health, including the outcast, helping people to see the way, to hear things with understanding, and giving love and respect to even the most insignificant among us by society's standards. This may be at some personal cost to us. We might need to give up our place in the centre of things, forgo our need for praise and recognition, give up some of our own time. This kind of sacrificial life we will paradoxically find to be life-giving both to others and ourselves.

These ideas challenge us as individuals and as a faith community. How do we welcome children as if they were Jesus? And welfare recipients? And new immigrants or refugees? And retirees to our town? How we welcome and treat those who have no status in our Church will be a sign of our greatness.