

St P&P Great Missenden 9.9.12 8.00 & 10.00am

Almighty God, grant us the courage to attend to your word and allow it's wisdom to change our lives, In Jesus name, Amen

Well -back from the hols and wham! James 2 in all its glory.

This little book has often been looked down on -after all it doesn't do grand theology. No incarnation or atonement, no resurrection or 2nd coming. It's earthy, it's practical, it's crystal clear. When you read James and you call yourself a Christian, you have no-where to hide.

It is said that it was Martin Luther's least favourite book because to him it seemed to emphasise works over pure faith. I don't think he was that naïve.

I want to suggest that if we could really get your head round this book - if we could work out with God how to live by the golden rule 'Love others as you love yourself' and ground our theology in that rule rather than treating it as some sort of optional extra to faith - if we could do that then we would be able to forget all the angst about doctrine and churchmanship, about missions and initiatives, because our lives would simply shout out the truth of the love of God.

In the early church there was no developed institution -certainly no strategy or hierarchy -and yet there was a degree of growth that was extraordinary.

People didn't see someone walking down the street wearing a cross and say 'oh look there's a Christian -I think I'll become one too!' No -we are clearly told, by historic document as well as by Jesus own words that what marked out the Christians from the rest of society was very simply the way they loved one another.

Now these verses are a bit of a problem for someone writing a sermon because they speak for themselves.

I'm going to read the whole passage again -in the Message version. Please try not to switch off. Imagine that James was here -21C -and was speaking directly to us.

If I were to walk up and down the aisle asking you what struck you in particular -what would you say?

The Royal Rule of Love

My dear friends, don't let public opinion influence how you live out our glorious, Christ-originated faith. If a man enters your church wearing an expensive suit, and a street person wearing rags comes in right after him, and you say to the man in the suit, "Sit here, sir; this is the best seat in the house!" and either ignore the street person or say, "Better sit here in the back row," haven't you segregated God's children and proved that you are judges who can't be trusted?

Listen, dear friends. Isn't it clear by now that God operates quite differently? He chose the world's down-and-out as the kingdom's first citizens, with full rights and privileges. This kingdom is promised to anyone who loves God. And here you are abusing these same citizens! Isn't it the high and mighty who exploit you, who use the courts to rob you blind? Aren't they the ones who scorn the new name—"Christian"—used in your baptisms?

You do well when you complete the Royal Rule of the Scriptures: "Love others as you love yourself." But if you play up to these so-called important people, you go against the Rule and stand convicted by it. You can't pick and choose in these things, specializing in keeping one or two things in God's law and ignoring others. The same God who said, "Don't commit adultery," also said, "Don't murder." If you don't commit adultery but go ahead and murder, do you think your non-adultery will cancel out your murder? No, you're a murderer, period.

Talk and act like a person expecting to be judged by the Rule that sets us free. For if you refuse to act kindly, you can hardly expect to be treated kindly. Kind mercy wins over harsh judgment every time.

Dear friends, do you think you'll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, "Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!" and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup—where does that get you? Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?

Well now -what strikes you?

You may home in on the totally unequivocal call to treat everyone equally. I have this passage very deeply embedded in my world-view.

From childhood I was uneasy about hierarchy. People have skills and responsibilities that mean they are called to leadership roles, but it doesn't make them of higher value than anyone else. –After all they are only using the gift that God gave them in the first place. Truth be told I don't like processions in church for this very reason. Why would one set of people stand up when another group walked in? I know that it's tradition and all that -but in my heart it is a symbol of treating people unevenly. – When we have a civic service I have an overwhelming urge to put the great and the good at the back of the church!!

As you well know I have a very profound commitment to equality. I think that it is a core Christian value -and one that you can't fudge. The problem for the church at the moment is that it says that it believes we are all equal before God -and then goes on and treats people very unequally. This passage of James tells us the proof is what you actually do. His example is what you do with a smelly old tramp -I can all too easily identify examples for the institution, but what about us there at Gt Miss? In what way do we undervalue people. Do some folk feel they become less valued as they get older? Are there children who wish we knew their names? Do we think less of people who don't have the time or desire to be active in church life?

Please tell me where we are blind about this.

There is an other side which is good news. On Friday I went -like many of you, to the Paralympics. There is no doubt that as a country we have been leading the world in valuing the achievements of people with a disability. I'm sure there is still a huge way to go, and of course at the moment we have an Eaton/Oxbridge government par excellence, but the ethos of this country is far less discriminatory than in the past.

Within the church I think the same is true. When ever Bishop Alan speaks boldly and openly about treating everyone as equal before God he gets 100 letters of support in contrast to two or three green ink offerings. I think in our hearts we get it -but often carelessness and thoughtlessness mean that the way we behave is not always experienced as helpful.

I have a friend who works with churches to make them more friendly and accessible for folk on the autistic spectrum. She says that it is primarily ignorance and lack of sensitivity rather than anything deliberate that makes church such a tough place for many.

The other encouragement was a long Skype conversation I had last week with an Iman who works at the Blue Mosque in Istanbul, Turkey. It was

astonishing how many things we agreed about. He was passionate about faith being about the whole of life and about accepting the right of other people to live their within their own religious traditions.

What else strikes you?

Well -there is the challenge of the middle section. If we are judgemental -if we quote some rule or other to condemn an other Christian then says James you have to be consistent. God's call to love one another is there to set us free. If -he argues -you choose to continue to live by the law -specially if you use the law as a weapon against others, then man up. Follow **all** the law, not just the bits you fancy.

It's a reductio ad absurdum argument. It's utterly ridiculous -funny -to think you could keep all the law in the bible -there was a guy who tried it for a year remember. Totally bonkers!.....It's actually a call for a little self-knowledge. When you are being judgemental it shows a lack of self-awareness. None of us can possibly fulfil the law. We, of course, accuse others of failing in one area whilst crashing down in our own particular and special way!

This is why, although James is going on to talk about the practical evidence of faith -he always leads us back to the need we all have for grace.

What else strikes you?

Well - maybe it's simply that killer last sentence: 'Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?'

There has been considerable and interesting on-line discussion recently on the subject 'why are Christians so mean to each other?'

Actually of course this is a complex topic -but in the end James is telling us -and will tell us again in his next section on the use of the tongue, that what is in your heart will inevitably be expressed in your conduct. If you have faith, but there is no processing of the central gift of God's love through faith, then your words might speak the gospel but your attitudes and your deeds will be stuck in judgement and unkindness.

So often we delude ourselves that Christianity is about concepts, theology, some deep, mysterious inner spiritual mystery which can run in parallel to our normal daily lives.

I don't believe that you can detach your spiritual life from your physical or emotion life. If you shout at someone -that is as much a spiritual act as a physical and emotional one.

James' example is clear. The smelly tramp walks into church and you greet her with holy word -"may God bless you' or some such thing - but you don't offer her a cup of tea, or see what you can do to sort a bed for the night -when you pop her in the back row by the door so no-one notices or smells her -then telling her that God loves her is meaningless.

This is what I believe about the work we are trying to do in India. Education for those poorest children is not simply a means to tell them a spiritual message -it is itself the gospel -the good news for them. Good news is good news -body mind and soul.

Now I've run right out of time. Please, please go home and read this passage again. You really don't need a sermon at all -it is so up front and obvious.

It would be scary if it were not all underpinned by God's amazing, life changing, ever- forgiving grace.

AMEN