

Sunday 2 September, 2018

A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne at St Paul's Cathedral Melbourne on the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, the first in a series on the Epistle of James:

Reading: *James 1.17-27*

What does it mean to live an authentically Christian life? How may we build community among one another? How may we become God's family? These are questions that have motivated Christian authors through the ages, to reflect on their own experience of life with Jesus. Our Scriptures, in particular, tell us of what it means both to live with Jesus as one of his disciples, living and walking with him in life, and to live with him as one of his later followers, following him in the expectation of eternal life with him.

One of the Biblical writers who both knew the living Jesus and knew about living with Jesus in the resurrection power of the Holy Spirit, is James, whose epistle we will be reading closely this month. His epistle is among the shorter letters of the New Testament, with only five chapters. It is a letter of counsel and comfort to the dispersed Jewish followers of Jesus, written by the first leader of the Jerusalem Church, James the apostle, the 'brother of the Lord'. It is a letter about 'true religion', which James describes not only as a profoundly held faith and love for God, but the practical care for others and oneself.

James writes to the 'twelve tribes in the dispersion' in the first or second decade after the resurrection. He writes from Jerusalem, where he is leading the early Christian community, and is overseeing the 'grafting in', as Paul calls it, of gentile believers into the community of Christians. In the Acts of the Apostles we read how James, and Peter, Paul and Barnabas meet in Jerusalem to hear about Paul's own conversion, and the subsequent conversions of Arabs, Greeks and Romans Paul and Barnabas had brought about through their own proclamation of the resurrection.

James presided over the Jerusalem assembly of believers in Jesus, and were told of 'the signs and wonders God had done through Paul and Barnabas among the gentiles'. And in a ruling that would change the life of the Christian community for ever, James ruled that gentile believers enjoyed the same standing as Jewish believers, that gentile believers did not need first to convert to Judaism in order to live out the resurrection faith. This is what he said then, 'I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those gentiles who have turned to God'. Indeed, their coming into the fellowship of believers fulfilled God's own plan, James told: 'This agrees with the words of the prophets [that ...] "all other peoples may seek the Lord, even the gentiles over whom my name has been called".'

James himself had been an observant Jew all his life, an observer of the Jewish law. Now he stipulates that others may join the family of Jesus, as long as they 'abstain from things polluted by idols' and the service of self and other gods. And in his epistle, he relates to the

people who, like him, continued following the Jewish law. How *they* were to live with those who were joining the ranks of the believers. Gentiles joining the Jewish faith was nothing new, James is recorded as saying in the Acts of the Apostles, 'in every city, for generations past, Moses had those who proclaim him'. And now James told his own peers – Jews who came to know and worship the risen Jesus – what it is that they ought to do to create a new community, in which (as Paul puts it) both the natural branches of the olive tree – the Jewish believers – and the cultivated branches – gentile Christians – may together bear much fruit. May be two branches of one family tree: may together be the family of God.

The counsel James gives is practical: this is not about how the two communities were formed, or what their differences are. Rather, James writes about what it is that people who are experiencing differences may do in order to live together in harmony. What is it that we may do to be community, to become God's family. And he counsels his readers (and us with them), that it is when we show generosity to others in what it is that we say and do, that we reflect something of God's great goodness, and God's immense gift of life to the world. 'Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change'.

God is constant, James says. He does not change, but continues to gift us good gifts so that we may make known his changeless love in an ever-changing world. And the way in which we partake of God's gifts is two-fold: by the gift of his Word, and by rebirth through the Spirit, 'so that we would become a kind of first-fruits of his creatures'. We are grafted together, assembled together, by the Word. Are filled by the Spirit. And this enables us to bear more fruit together than we might have done on our own. When we come together to hear and make known the message of the resurrection, we may become a 'kind of first-fruits' of that harvest of life that God promises to all who love Jesus. When we come together to share in the Word and work of God, we make visible what it means to be God's family – his children.

James is not a philosophical theologian like our own patron, St Paul. Rather, he is a practical leader, someone who observes and counsels, appeals and determines, so that the community of gentile and Jewish Christians may grow and bear the fruit of resurrection. Much of the epistle that we will be studying, contains practical advice on how to respond to the gift of God's Word in community. What does it mean to receive God's Word, to be born again by that Word? What kinds of behaviours are expected of those who have been incorporated into the body of Christ, are part of God's family? What is it that will make a community of faith grow and flourish. James tells us that we each have a part to play in this building up of community: we are never passive recipients of the Word. Rather, God's Word, when received in faith, is active and can bring change in our lives. It is through God's Word that we are adopted, are made children of God.

James tells us that God's Word implanted in us, 'saves souls', makes us God's own. And when we have become God's own, we may show forth that change by what we do, how we

behave, what we say. The implanted Word of God has the power to make people come close to God and to make his teaching and wisdom their own. We see this in the gospel stories when people turn to Christ, or indeed, when others come to regard Jesus through new eyes. Remember how in the gospel, the people of Jesus' home-town who had seen Jesus grow up, were asking themselves, 'where then did this man get all this?' They had heard him teach, and seen him heal others, and took offence at the change they had perceived in him. 'Is not this the carpenter's son', they said, 'is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers called James and Joseph, and Simon and Judas?' (Matthew 13.55). Do we not know well his own extended family?

I wonder whether James reflected on this experience when he came to write his own epistle. Paul certainly knows him as 'the brother of the Lord', and so it is not unlikely that he was present among those who pointed to Jesus' *earthly* family when they were unable to make sense of the works of his *heavenly* Father. 'Where then did Jesus get all this?', the people who, like James, had seen him grow up in the home of Mary and Joseph asked themselves?

And were given the answer, by the Lord's brother, that this transformative power comes from God himself: the 'Father of lights', who sent his incarnate Word and Holy Spirit to give to all people 'in fulfilment of his own purpose ... birth by the Word of truth'. Where then did Jesus get all this? From the Father of lights – his God and ours. And where do we – the friends and followers of Jesus get all this? As a free gift from the Father – through the implanted Word dwelling in us by the Spirit. The active Word of God, activated in human hearts and shown forth in human deeds, is what makes us God's own, God's children.

Another interchange that the Lord's brother might have overheard, and which may well have given shape to his theology of the active Word of God, is found a chapter earlier in Matthew's gospel. 'Someone told Jesus', we read in Matthew 12, "'Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.'" But to the one who told him this, Jesus replied, "Who is my mother and who are my brothers?" And pointing to his disciples, he said, "*Here* are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister and mother.'" (Matthew 12.46-50). Those who receive the Word of God and act on it, who 'do the will of my Father in heaven', are already part of God's family. Which is why the brother of Jesus, James, may *best* be placed to tell *us*, who have become Jesus' brothers and sisters through God's adoption, what it is that *we* may need to do to be God's family: 'be doers of the Word, and not hearers alone'. Let God's Word grow in you and become active. Let Jesus be implanted in your lives and shape your life.

Those who are 'doers of the Word', look beyond themselves and their own concerns, James tells us in his epistle. They look at God, 'the perfect law, the law of liberty' and, by recognising the implanted gifts of God in them and acting on them, they 'persevere, being

not hearers who forget but doers who act', people who will be 'blessed in their doing'. If we 'do the will of Jesus' Father in heaven', we are told, we are God's children.

And James, possibly out of the experience of straddling the difficult relationship as a brother in family-life and a brother-in-God of Jesus, tells us that what holds us together in our own diversity as Christians – people of Jewish origins and gentile; women and men; people of different languages and races – reminds us that our being family in Christ is expressed by what it is we *do*. 'Religion is worthless', James concludes today's epistle reading, if we 'do not bridle our tongues', and it is 'worthless if we deceive our hearts'. God's family of faith is given its worth when we care for one another. When we regard one another as brothers and sisters; become doers of the implanted Word of God, and not hearers alone, James tells.

As we journey through his epistle this month, I invite you to reflect on what it is that we already do that helps build family in this place: what is it that we already do to support your brothers and sisters in Christ? Give thanks for those gifts and actions, and pray for the resolve to strengthen them. And at the same time, I invite you to reflect on what it may be that we need to let go, what it may be that we do to 'deceive our hearts', to make our religion empty and worthless? Let go of those actions or words, and pray for the forbearance to 'bridle your tongues', and to 'rid yourself of all ... wickedness'. Above all, give thanks that God calls us to be his family. That he gifts us his Word to dwell in us, implants it in our hearts, so that we, as doers of the will of the Father in heaven, may become Christ's brothers and sisters and be known as members of his family by our deeds.

Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and for ever. Amen.