

Sermon for Easter 4 2020

James 1.17-21

“Know this, my beloved brethren. Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, ²⁰ for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God”.

St James is an interesting character. In his letter he is constantly calling people to live their faith in action, as well as in prayer and worship. It is James who coined the phrase, “So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” This observation is based on the rhetorical scene of having someone starving approach another asking for food. If they are sent on their way without food, but with a wish of goodwill, then the person approached has not revealed their faith. Or perhaps more accurately their faith did not activate a desire to feed the starving person.

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Look in the mirror.

Now I know that there are people who play the system to maximise their return. I know there are people who are not starving who say that they are hoping to receive money. The money, if given, is not used for food, but it is used to purchase whatever substance of addiction may be their desire. This is why as a matter of policy, in every parish I have been in ministry, no cash was ever handed out. Food supplied, appropriate medical prescriptions filled, tickets for public transport within the city, yes, this was supplied, but never cash. The question under this is one which asks whether in good faith we can supply cash to a person who will immediately risk their life and sanity for an illegal substance.

When James teaches that our faith must have a practical outcome he is not saying that we throw cash around willy-nilly. He is suggesting that we fulfil the instruction from our Lord in the gospel of Matthew. 25.34-36 *“Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.”* Jesus went on to explain that just as they had cared for Him so they were to treat every person who was in need. In this way our faith would exhibit good works. This example is a sign of righteousness.

James works to a particular formula when he calls people to action. He speaks of hearing the word of God, receiving the word of God, and obeying the word of God. Underlying this is the belief that Jesus is the Word of God and it is Jesus we are to obey. John begins his gospel with this understanding. *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”* The Word in Scripture is Jesus. This is also made clear in the gospel reading for today. John 14.11 *“Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me; or else believe me for the sake of the works themselves.”* Once again, we have that direct link to faith and works.

So with James, we are taught to be quick to hear. We hear the word of God, we read the word of God and we preach the word of God. However our understanding of the Word of God does not end in the listening. We can listen to all sorts of things and either accept them or reject them. Sometimes we hear things and we never ever think of them again.

James teaches that we are not only to hear the word, but we are to receive the word. It is in receiving the word and accepting the word that our faith grows. To receive something is to take it into our heart and mind and to own it as our belief and understanding. When we receive the word, we are accepting that Christ Jesus is everything that he says he is. Not only that we are taking ownership of that message. The message is ours to teach and to hold close to our heart. The Word is our gift of life eternal and it is ours. This is what Jesus died for. This is where our salvation is found. This is why we are to reach out in faith and hope and help others to understand. We are the bearers of a very special message and an even more precious gift.

How do we bring others to believe? We follow the commandments of our Lord. We follow the teaching in our scripture. We show our faith through our works.

We have received the Word of God and now. As we follow the formula of James, we are to obey the Word of God. this brings to mind the two great commandments. Matthew 22.36-40 ³⁶ *“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?”* ³⁷ *And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.* ³⁸ *This is the great and first commandment.* ³⁹ *And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbour as yourself.* ⁴⁰ *On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.”*

There is nothing plainer said. We are to love God and we are to love our neighbour. In loving our neighbour our desire must be to do whatever is best for them and whatever might be within our means. We are not asked to do the impossible, but we are asked to do our best.

So we are to be *“Quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger.”* When we think about our call to love our neighbour we would do well to think of the times we have spoken too quickly, and spoken when angry. Sometimes we would have been better advised to have kept our immediate thoughts to ourselves, because if spoken they will cause much hurt. Far too often words spoken in anger leave a gaping wound that will never heal. Yes, there is room for righteous anger. Paul speaks of not going to bed angry, but work to resolve problems prior to sleep. Jesus was angry when he overturned the tables of the money changers and market stalls within the temple.

Unresolved anger is like a cancer and it eats away at the person who is angry, while causing long term hurt to the person with whom we have vented our spleen. *“²⁰for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God”*. To intentionally cause hurt to another does not bring one closer to God or our neighbour. To open our mouth without putting our brain in gear can be very hazardous.

The blessing of our faith and the teaching of our Scripture is found in the way we express ourselves, and in the way we behave. We are to Listen to the Word of God, we are to Receive the Word of God, and we are to Obey the Word of God. When we get this formula right people will recognise our faith in our good works.