

Sermon for Easter 5 2020

"If any one thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this man's religion is vain. ²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world."
James 1.26-27

We explored the message of James last week and we were rewarded with the teaching that our faith is to be visible to the casual observer. Our faith is held in our heart and therefore drives our thoughts, words, and actions.

James continues this teaching in the reading this week. He begins by linking the heart to the tongue. A tongue which is not controlled can do untold damage. This reminds me of the old adage that we should put our brain in gear before engaging the mouth.



No doubt we can all bring to mind an occasion where we have blurted out some accusation and then immediately regretted doing so. In this day and age where communication is instant a whole new world of embarrassment awaits. With email or Facebook and such things we can either send an insulting message, or indeed, receive one from someone else. It seems that it is very easy to depersonalise our communication when we can carry on a conversation by typing a message in anger or haste, and then pressing that unforgivable button with "SEND" written on it. Once that button is pressed there is no going back. If I have need to respond to a tricky situation by electronic means I

am very likely to write it, then put it aside for 24 hours. In this way I can check whether my brain was engaged prior to my speaking.

Of course, James had no such system of electronic communication. He could write his thoughts down and ultimately they would be published in the script of the Bible. There is nothing slapdash or ill conceived in his writing. He has not written anything in a rage and there is no intention to be rude or callous. His teaching is primarily based on the love that God bestows on us, and our joy expressed when we have opportunity to show that love to others.

There is a definite intention when he makes reference to the widows and orphans. Back in that time widows and orphans had absolutely nothing. There was no way that they could repay any kindness. They had no family support and no income. They were hardly recognised as being human. This is not an exaggeration. James points out that this was their affliction. So, when James teaches that we are to care for orphans and widows he is pointing out their dire situation while calling on the heart of the reader to give of themselves for the benefit of the disadvantaged. For the act of kindness there is no expectation of earthly reward. It is a giving of self through divine love. It is an act of faith.

We are reminded today, as we were last week, that it was James who pointed out that faith without works is dead.

James continues in his teaching with the teaching that we to are keep ourselves free from the stain of the world. World in this context, as it is in the gospel of John, is all that is driven by human ambition without any reference to God. The world is that place driven by the traps and snares of the devil, complete with the deceit and temptation that is dangled around us.

To remain unstained is to live by the law of our God. Jesus is quoted by John as saying that if we love him, we will happily keep his commandments. This is not an imposition but a joy and delight. The reading is full of promise and future interaction with God.

Jesus explains that he has to obediently follow the path of death and resurrection so that the love of God can be fully revealed. It is after Jesus' death that the Holy Spirit will come and reside among and within us. Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit as being an extension of himself. It is the same with God the Father. In this reading we have an excellent reference to the Trinity of God. Jesus saying that he must return to the Father in order that the Holy Spirit may come to us.

Instead of saying that he will not leave us as orphans he says that he will not leave us desolate. No doubt this was the state of the disciples. They had been with Jesus for three years. They had given up everything to follow him. And now Jesus has explained that he is to go from them. They would have indeed felt that sense of desolation that we all feel when someone we have come to love, dies.

The disciples have also heard that they will do remarkable things in the name of Jesus. They have already been participating in the healing of the sick and the casting out of demons. Such was the power that they have already received from Jesus. It seems as though they believed that they could only do these things if Jesus was around to be a backup.

This is both true and necessary. Jesus does need to be around as backup. But he does not need to be there physically. This is what he is teaching. His promise is that if the disciples let him go, and rejoice with him as he returns to the Father, he will return to them and reside within and among them. In this sense they were not losing Jesus at all. The relationship simply changed from the physical to the spiritual.

This is the message for us in our lives. We are called to love Jesus and to keep his commandments. In keeping his commandments we will be loved by the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We are loved by our God.

It is therefore this love that God has for us that will encourage us to treat all people with respect and to show love for the children of God. our brothers and sisters in the faith. The expression of our love, or God's love, does not end with our reaching out to the people of our faith, but it is found and expressed in our determination to love all people, regardless of colour, gender, belief, race or nation.

When we reach out in the love of God we are expressing our faith. The important thing is to remember that the words of an unrestrained mouth will also reveal a truth about us. So we reign in our tongue and teach it to behave with dignity so that our faith may be expressed in a very positive and attractive manner.