

## SERMON for Pentecost 14 – August 29, 2021.

Readings: Deuteronomy 4: 1-2, 6-9; Psalm 15; James 1: 17-27; Mark 7: 1-8, 14-23

This morning is the first of five Sundays when our Epistle will come from the Letter of James.

James is one of the books which had a very hard fight to get into the New Testament. Even when it did come to be regarded as Scripture, it was spoken of with a certain reserve and suspicion, and even as late as the sixteenth century, the reformer Martin Luther would gladly have banished it from the New Testament altogether.

Even in our own day, for most, James does not occupy a position in the forefront of the New Testament. <sup>1</sup>

Martin Luther famously referred to it as “an epistle full of straw”, because, in his opinion, it contains nothing evangelical.

There were many “James” in the early followers of Jesus and it is impossible to definitively identify who the author was.

Rather than be “evangelical”, about spreading the Gospel as such, in my humble opinion, the book is more about what it is to live a truly authentic, Christian life. About “walking the walk” and “Talking the talk”.

Some years ago, I came across this slightly amusing, but revealing story. It comes across better when it is personalised and localised .... (but I assure you, it wasn't me!!)

I was sitting at a stop light this morning. The lady in front of me was going through papers on the seat of her car, and when the light changed to green she did not obey its command - a green light is a commandment - Not a suggestion!

When the light turned to red, and she had still not moved, I began (with my windows up) screaming, blowing my horn and beating on my steering wheel! My expressions of distress were interrupted by a policeman, gun drawn, tapping on my window.

"You can't arrest me for hollering in my own car," I protested, as he ordered me into the back seat of his cruiser.

After about two hours in jail, the arresting officer returned and advised me I was free to go. I said, "I knew you couldn't arrest me for yelling in my own car. You haven't heard the last of this!"

The officer replied, "I didn't arrest you for shouting in your car. I was directly behind you at the light. I saw you screaming and beating your steering wheel, and I said to myself, 'What a jerk. But there is nothing I can do to her for throwing a fit in her own car.'

"Then I noticed the 'Cross' hanging from your rear view mirror, the brand new 'Choose Life' license tag, the bumper sticker - 'Jesus is Coming Soon' and the Fish symbol, and I thought you must have stolen the car from a Christian! <sup>2</sup>

We may regularly come to church, we may enjoy singing our hymns and saying our prayers, but do we live an authentic Christian life, 24/7, or only when it suits us?

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. [James 1:19-20]

.... But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. [vv.22-24]

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. [vv26-27]

This week, after our sojourn in John, we return to readings from Mark's Gospel and begin with a rather curious reading about washing your hands before meals. Surely Jesus isn't really making an issue of a point of hygiene? Of course not ... it is much more than that (although in the current climate, he might!).

Here Jesus is arguing as to how such external things can affect our spirituality.

Perth theologian, Bill Loader suggests:

The historical Jesus probably did say something like ... 'It is not so much what enters a person which makes them unclean, but what comes out of them.' Mark captures Jesus' priorities, ... that it is a person's attitude and ethical action which matters more than all the external observances. By focusing on attitudes of the heart and resultant behaviour, Mark is encouraging us to rethink our approach to the commandments and the Bible. Paul did a similar thing when he focused on love. Jesus started it all with statements such as, 'The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the sabbath'. Paul contrasted the two approaches by speaking of 'letter' and 'spirit'. To follow the way of the letter (of the Law), you have more control; everything is defined; people can get lost and easily fall into the background. The way of the Spirit says that, to God, people matter most. Biblical commands never take precedence over what is compassionate and caring.<sup>3</sup>

Likewise, it is not the strict adherence to external religious tradition which will lead us to live an authentic Christian life; but the internal things. It is what happens in the privacy of our heart, it is what we do with our lives, what comes out of us, if you like.

While St Paul talks about the fruit of the Spirit, James talks a lot about the need for Christians to express their faith in doing good works. This is not good works so we can work our way to heaven. It doesn't work that way. It is rather being in the service of God, as a love offering to God and God's creation.

According to James we must not just be hearers of the word, but doers of the word. We can't just sit on our comfortable backsides in church, 'hearing the word' without then going out and serving others. Next week we will have a passage that has haunted me for years.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. [James 2: 14-17]

.... I can feel next week's sermon coming on!!!

A favourite prayer of mine is the Prayer of St Teresa of Avila, it goes:

Christ has no body now on earth but yours,  
no hands but yours,  
no feet but yours;  
yours are the eyes through which he is to look  
with compassion on the world;  
yours are the feet with which he is to go about  
doing good;  
and yours, the hands with which he is to bless us now.

Like an echo or a response, comes this prayer from an unknown author:

Lord Jesus:  
I give you my hands to do your work.  
I give you my feet to go your way.  
I give you my eyes to see as you do.  
I give you my tongue to speak your words.  
I give you my mind that you may think in me.

I give you my spirit that in me you may love, your Father and all humankind.  
I give you my whole self that you may grow in me,  
so that it will be you, Jesus, living, working, praying in me. Amen.

This is what it is live as an authentic Christian in this world. This is what it means to talk the talk and walk the walk. It is all about how we respond to our faith. "By their fruits you will know them" How we behave in public and how we behave in the privacy of our own heart. Even how we behave in our own car at traffic lights!

Road rage is not a fruit of the Spirit! Love and understanding and compassion are.

May God's Spirit live and work and pray in you. Amen.

Revd Sally Buckley  
29 August, 2021.

#### REFERENCES:

1. William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible*.
2. David Sprang as posted on the *Midrash* in 2003.
3. William Loader, *First thoughts on the Gospel*, loosely paraphrased.