

Reflection Sunday 15 September**James - a challenge to how we live (James 3 1-12)**

It was interesting last Monday to observe the reaction to the open letter written to the Government by 400 church leaders, a letter expressing their opposition to proposed changes to laws relating to the Treaty of Waitangi. The dismissal of the church leaders and the people they represent by the Act Party leader David Seymour was typical of so many politicians but his comment that this was “not the first time Christianity had tried to interfere in democracy” was absolutely right, even though he mistakes democracy for politics – what Diana Bass in her blog from The Cottage refers to as the game - the polls; us versus them; a culture war; upping the ante; getting the economy moving; profits before people; heartless; cold and calculating.

And the open letter from our church leaders should not be the last time Christianity “interferes” with the political world.

Jesus’ half-brother James rose to prominence as a leader of the mother church in Jerusalem, the first Christian community ever. People experienced difficult times during the twenty years that James was their leader – famine, great poverty and persecution by the traditional Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. James, a pillar of this community, acting as a wise and courageous peacemaker, was murdered in 62CE by the priestly establishment for following Jesus. James was another example of Christianity “interfering” with an unjust empire.

While the lectionary reading is James 3:1–12 my focus will be more about the overall book of James and what message it might have for us today. I discovered that Martin Luther, in his early days as a reformer, thought that James was “an epistle full of straw”. He would later change his mind about that.

I have found the book of James to be an interesting and thoughtful legacy of his teaching and wisdom; to me it has many useful ideas for life. It’s a summary of sage wisdom, much like the book of Proverbs, for any community of Jesus’ followers. James doesn’t bring new theological information; instead he wants to get in our business and challenge how we live. It’s a book of possibilities.

From our lectionary reading we heard that not too many of us should become teachers because “those who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.”

This passage apparently contains the single most sustained discussion in the New Testament on the use of the tongue. James is steeped in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament Scriptures and also

in the teaching of Jesus, to which his own teaching has many parallels. Both the book of Proverbs and James spoke about the nature and use of the tongue and James walks in their footprints. Much of what he says is a powerful exposé of the sin and failure that mar our speech.

I hope today to avoid falling into any of the sins James writes about.

Despite all that, the book of James is much more than a rebuke of what we might say. His five chapters constitute an extended piece of pastoral preaching, laced as it is with words of wisdom and warning. His goal is to restate the basic themes of Jewish Christianity and make sure they stay as an option for Christians in time to come.

Chapter 1, the introductory chapter is designed to sum up the main ideas to the entire book, and is a flowing stream of wise teachings and one-liners that introduce the reader to all of the keywords and themes that are seen in subsequent chapters.

The main chapters of the book, 2 to 5, comprise twelve short teachings that call God's people to wholehearted devotion to the way of Jesus. But, these chapters don't develop one main idea in a linear way. Instead, each teaching stands alone and usually concludes with a memorable statement or phrase. For example in today's reading: "think of a ship: big as it is and driven by such strong winds, it can be steered by a very small rudder, and it goes wherever the pilot wants it to go. So it is with the tongue: small as it is, it can boast about great things."

All of James' teachings are connected through key repeated words and themes.

The Global Message of James

The message of James is that we must manifest God's love in practical ways in our lives. A transformed life of love for others should be the result of experiencing God's love.

The letter of James enables God's people to flourish as they journey through life in this challenging world. As with Proverbs, the main point of James is that godly wisdom works - true wisdom does not sit still. Throughout James the church is confronted with several strong exhortations as to how wisdom works, all of which speak clearly to us, the church, today.

You won't be surprised that one aspect of the book of James that really speaks to me is what he says about wealth and poverty. Throughout his letter James raises the issue of wealth and, each time, he says just the opposite of what the world says about money.

- "Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation" (1:9–10).
- "Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom?" (2:5).
- "Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you" (5:1).

To a contemporary world obsessed with the desire for material wealth, James reminds us of the emptiness and futility of such pursuits.

So how do we respond to the messages that James brings us?

One way of looking at James' message is to consider it to be a book of possibilities. Possibilities about ways to live out the Christian faith. Possibilities for loving your neighbour.

Confronted with a host of global issues and concerns, it's not hard to find tangible ways to live out the teaching of James. We only have to look around this church to see people who are living examples of the faith and works that James talks about. But be assured that we should not feel guilty for not doing more to alleviate the world's needs. We must be realistic.

James does ask us to engage the world around us. This is the path of love, as we have been loved. 'You are doing well if you really fulfil the royal law that says You shall love your neighbour as yourself,' (James 2:8).

Where does the intersection of church and politics start and end? By not protesting when politicians make decisions that negatively impact people, are we ignoring James rebuke about talking peace to the needy but not providing the things needed by them? Do we simply accept that politicians will always have the best interests of the needy and the poor and even the average citizen at heart?

I have become very cynical about politicians. When a new policy is announced my first reaction is to ask "who does this really benefit?" You might be surprised at how often the answer is "those who are already rich".

Do we, just as the 400 church leaders have done, make our voices known, call out those who ignore the commandment "You shall love your neighbour as yourself".

As Rev Rinny Westra says in his book 'Re-laying the foundations': "Jesus was not just about celebrating poverty, he was on about empowering the poor". Jesus and James died because of their actions and words that challenged the rich and powerful. It can be the miracle of our works and words that can change the world around us, perhaps one handshake, one loving hug, one delivered meal at a time, but we do we need to do more to hold those in power to account for their actions that don't fulfil the commandment "You shall love your neighbour as yourself". That is the challenge of the book of James – wise and enduring faith, and courageous, challenging works that keep the basic themes of Christianity alive in times to come.

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