

Sermon 7 February 2016.
Jane Ward-Hall
Show me your faith. James 2

This is the second talk on the book of James. It is a letter written to Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. James was the equivalent of a Bishop overseeing many congregations. He was concerned. News had been reported to him that worried him. His congregations were thinking they were doing OK but there were various issues that James needed to challenge them on. As Sue said last week these 5 short chapters contain a lot of wisdom and practical advice on Christian living. They are worth reading.

The area we are thinking about this morning is found in Chapter 2:14-26. James had heard that some of his congregation were merely giving intellectual assent to faith, talking about it, and thinking that was enough, rather than their faith being apparent by the way they lived their lives. This letter challenges 1st century Christian thinking and behaviour. It can challenge ours too!

Years ago the results of a national census said that 76% of the people who live in this area ticked the box saying they were Christian. I remember David one Sunday saying "Where are these people?". Our local Churches would be bulging if they all turned up.

Our behaviour matching what we say about ourselves is an important issue. Would someone looking through the key hole of our life be able to see we are a Christian? Is our faith seen in our actions?

So serious is this issue that James, in our reading, uses the word "dead" 3 times:

Verse 17 "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead". And verse 26 "for just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead".

The opposite of death is life. This is what this is all about: dead faith versus living faith. James wants his flock to have life and live it to the full. He knows that a living faith is the way human beings experience what it is to truly live.

Empty words even though they are about God are still empty words. For our faith to be alive it's got to be as St Paul says "faith expressing itself through love" - love in action.

But let me be clear. Good works alone won't save us. We cannot save ourselves. Only Jesus saves us, and our gratitude to him leads us to do good works.

The foundation of our faith is that God is the creator of all - all life, love, joy, everything that is good finds its source in Him. All life is a gift from God and there is nothing we can do to earn it.

But at the beginning of the bible a split happened, with the story of Adam and Eve being tempted to disobey God by the serpent, representing evil, there is a battle on. The human race turned away from their creator thinking they could go their own way and manage just fine without God. This battle still exists. We live in a broken world.

We live in the tension of the battle field. The draw of love, of goodness, of life with God versus the pull towards sin, sucking us back to emptiness and death.

James is warning against empty, dead faith. For our faith to be of any value to us it needs to be life giving, transformative; it's got to be more than empty words.

How can our faith become alive?

It is said that the longest distance in the world is from the head to the heart. My proposal to you is that living faith involves movement, from head, to heart, to feet which is the action part. Let's look at these.

Head

James was writing to Jewish Christians who saw Jesus as the fulfillment of scripture but were struggling to integrate their new faith into their ancient traditions.

Verse 19 says "You believe that God is one" James is meeting the issue head on, quoting the Jewish daily prayer. It is a wonderful prayer we still pray it today.

"Hear oh Israel, the lord our God the Lord is one, and you shall love the lord your God, with all your heart and mind and soul and strength ".

Keeping the Jewish law involved a lot of ritual. Using your head and will power to keep up with all the prayers, washing, eating rules etc. These could take precedence over loving your neighbour practically, as the parable of the Good Samaritan illustrates. These people were under a false belief that just saying you believed in God and following various rules were what was needed to keep yourself right with God.

I find myself with a lot of sympathy for the people James is challenging. For all of us these ancient and modern traditions, cultural trends and even family patterns can be very deep seated - causing a block to growing in faith. They can hold us back.

Recently we visited my sister to celebrate her 60th birthday. I'm the elder sister. Since our parents death I am the only person who has known her all of her life. We reminisced about our childhood. I remembered coming home from school one afternoon, to find my bedroom ransacked, all my toys and jigsaws tipped out of their boxes on to the floor. I called my Mother who laughed and said "I wondered why she was so quiet". Well, I was outraged.

Many similar incidents caused me to be known as the "good girl" who had a "naughty little sister". Maybe you can identify similar patterns and labels from your upbringing. They can be the cause of problems later in life particularly in connection with our faith.

For me I can find myself trusting in my own goodness rather than the truth that God alone is good. It can be a dangerous trait. Leading to a tendency to pride and independence, knocking God off his throne and putting myself there instead, thinking I know best. This is sin and I try to repent of it as soon as I notice it.

Recognizing these patterns is one thing but that's in the head, we need a shift to the heart.

Heart

To move from a head centred faith to heart centred faith requires an experience of how much God loves us. Do you remember the disciples who met Jesus on the road to Emmaus and afterwards said "were our hearts not burning within us while he talked to us?"

We can meet with Jesus today and have our hearts warmed by an experience of His love, just as they did, most frequently through prayer, reading the bible, singing songs of worship. God does not love us because we are good, God loves us because God is good. The movement from heart faith to feet action seems to happen more naturally.

Putting our faith into action allows Jesus to live through us to touch the lives of others. As a result we become more sure of our identity in Christ, more at peace with ourselves.

Feet

Jesus is always involved in heart faith that leads to feet action. James is ever practical and gives two Old Testament examples that point to Jesus.

The first is the testing of Abraham. Did he love God enough that he would not withhold his only son from God.? (Gen. 22) So convinced is Abraham of the truth of God's promise that he would be the father of the nations, that he is even prepared to kill his son Isaac.

We know the dramatic story, just in the nick of time God tells Abraham to hold his dagger and provides a lamb to be sacrificed instead. This story is so full of symbolism. Now we know that the lamb God would send, to be sacrificed for us, was Jesus.

The other example is the exciting story of Rahab, the prostitute, (Joshua 2) who hide the Jewish spies and enabled them to escape to safety.

Eventually she married an Israelite and became the great-great-grandmother of King David and hence is part of the family tree of Jesus himself.

God still works in lives in the same way today. This is evident from "The leading your church into growth" course which is going on at the moment. In our group we've been sharing with each other how our faith in Jesus has changed our lives, stories of new careers, changes of direction, nudges to get involved with a certain groups. These are first hand testimonies of faith and action at work in our lives. Personally the story of my marriage to Terry, is one of God's mercy and grace, for which I will always be grateful.

To sum up.

It's faith and action together that lead to spiritual growth, this helps us to trust more in the God, we see revealed in Jesus, and allow Him to be seen in the world through the lives we live, and so cause others to believe in Him.

This is the huge privilege of the Christian faith; that when we open ourselves to God, he will transform us more into the likeness of Jesus and work through us to change the world.

This is God's plan of redemption. Our lives may feel like a battle but the truth we need to hang on to, is that Jesus has won the victory. The Gospels are brimming with evidence for this, centring on the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

With Lent about to start, what an excellent time to learn more. Sue encouraged us to take up reading the bible this Lent. I can assure you it is not a chore, it's exciting, and you will feel more alive as you meet with God in its pages. Amen.