

HOLY TRINITY SUNNINGDALE

Readings: James 4
Luke 13:31-35

Date: Sunday 21 February 2016

Thank you so much for your prayers and good wishes. We have had a lovely time away for half-term. We have travelled the country seeing our parents and our children and catching up on all their news.

The weather has been mixed but you probably are aware of that even if you've stayed here at home this week! At least we didn't see any snow!!

So back to the programme ... in this part of the term, we are in a series of sermons on the Letter of James.

Each week we have taken a word or phrase from one of the chapters: "Ask in faith", in chapter 1, "Show me your Faith", in chapter 2, and last week, Sue was focussing on the phrase "Make Peace" in chapter 3.

Today our phrase is "Submit Yourselves" from chapter 4.

I want to suggest that "submission" is something to do with discipline. So let's find out what James means by "submit yourselves" and see if he has some things we can think about further and maybe even take on ...

And we will do that under the headings:

Humble contentment Speaking well Remember who we are

But first, let's be aware that submission and the discipline it implies is in the air ...

We began the year talking about discipline ... I encouraged people at HTS to make three key new year resolutions:

- bible reading
- prayer and
- attendance at weekly worship

As we started the James series, Sue encouraged us to read a chapter of the letter each day.

At the 4Women's Breakfast, Kathryn encouraged those present to read a book during Lent (Bill Hybels' Simplify or John Ortberg's Soul Keeping).

Now that we find ourselves in Lent, do come along, if you can, to our 30 minute Monday Evening Reflections at 6.30pm – another submission or discipline to help us on our spiritual journey, as potentially we make that an appointment in our diary.

These kinds of submissions or disciplines are all really important.

But submission/discipline is in the air in popular culture too

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Watching what we eat and how much sugar we consume. I read this week that Starbucks Hot Mulled Fruit Drink has 25 teaspoons of sugar; Signature Hot Chocolate has 15. And Costa's Chai Latte contains 20 teaspoons of sugar. Keeping an eye on these levels for our own health and well-being is an act of submission and of discipline.

Submission/discipline is in the air in the everyday ...

A great friend of mine is being treated for cancer. There are extraordinarily demanding medical procedures to face. But alongside all these, there is also an encouragement to be as fit as is possible. We were with him on Thursday and I was absolutely astonished how heavy are the weights he is being asked to lift to maintain and even improve his fitness before the next phase of treatment begins this week. I could hardly move one of them at all as it was sitting by the front door.

So there is submission and discipline in terms of the things we might do – spiritually and physically. And these things are really important.

But is this the kind of submission or discipline James is writing about and encouraging us to engage with? Not quite. James is writing about submission and discipline related to what we do but also related to how we are, to our “being” not just our “doing”.

Humble contentment ...

The whole verse says this, v7:

Submit yourselves, therefore, to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.

James is writing this letter, as Sue reminded us last week, as an encouragement and a reprimand. Those he is writing to are not altogether behaving well. In Chapter 3, he has written about the power of the tongue to wreak havoc in a community or with gentleness and wisdom to bring peace.

Here in chapter 4 James writes of conflicts and disputes, cravings and warrings. If last week's challenge was about the tongue and speaking, this week it is about the heart and humbling.

God, (he says in v6), opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

Our heart attitude is key here. And the most basic heart attitude is humble contentment ...

The conflicts and disputes James is writing about, and the cravings and the warrings and the murdering and coveting are rooted in dissatisfaction with what we've got.

V2:

*You want something and do not have it
You covet something and cannot obtain it*

This kind of deep dissatisfaction is frighteningly prevalent in society today. It's a pervasive part of the human condition. It is the bread and butter of the ad men and of those in retail, commerce and banking. We see other people who have stuff we would like to have and it does something inside us. It turns our head, or messes with our mind.

And James speaks about this problem harshly – he calls this and in v4 he says:

Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?

The Message translation puts it like this:

You're spoiled children, each wanting your own way. You're cheating on God. If all you want is your own way, flirting with the world every chance you get, you end up enemies of God and his way.

This kind of temptation (to have what we see other people have got) is the kind that we saw the other Sunday evening. Then we met to study Luke's account of Jesus in the wilderness being tempted by the devil. Jesus is offered all manner of things the devil says he doesn't have: bread from a stone, all the kingdoms of the world, power and authority ... Each time Jesus rebuts the devil with words from scripture which speak about the provision of God (what he has got) and the ability of God (what he can do) and the reliability of God (that he can be trusted and will not fail).

I imagine that may be why James tells us so clearly in v7:

Submit yourselves, therefore, to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.

Submission here means discipline of heart and mind to say to ourselves that God is enough, in him we have everything we need.

Submission also means discipline of heart and mind to recognise the temptation and to be clear that it comes from the devil and to resist him.

When we were talking the other Sunday evening, we mentioned the phrase: "Just say No." Jesus says no to the devil's wily words. We, too, can and must say no to his oh so subtle and attractive offers, to the things he tempts us with, and to the things he tempts us to think and do.

Satisfaction and contentment in God and with God are the heart attitude he is looking for:

God yearns jealously for the spirit he has made to dwell in us.

And as we see this more clearly, so we draw near to God (v8) and we know and experience the promise that he will draw near to us.

If humble contentment is the most basic heart attitude, we will see two further consequences ...

V11 speaking well

V13 remembering who we are

speaking well

Last week, Sue took us through some of the challenges of the power of words so I don't want to repeat comments about that aspect of life ... save to say that the fact the James repeats it here must suggest, at the very least, that it was a real problem. Sometimes as we know well enough with children, we do have to tell them what's what more than once – we don't all get it first time around.

But the second consequence we can say a little more about:

remembering who we are

We have seen how submission and discipline are critical in terms of our heart attitude ... here we see that are important, too, in terms of our plans and decisions.

“Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money”. Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring.

Now please let's not get James wrong here. He is not saying that we should never have plans. He is not saying that we should never take decisions. But he is saying that we make plans and take decisions under God – he is our master, we are his servants. We are to know who we are.

And James puts us right in our place, v14:

What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say “If the Lord wishes ...”

Kathryn and I have been making plans ... for our 30th Wedding Anniversary later this year. We have been on the internet and have booked some things which we know we will enjoy doing. Our daughter Zoe and her husband Ed are beginning to think about next steps after college is over and where they will live, where Ed's curacy will be and what work there will be for Zoe in that place. Even Tim and Josh at university (and not finishing there until summer 2017 or summer 2018) have one eye on what options there might then be for them in the world of work.

With all of these wonderings and reflecting we are asking the question with the proviso “If the Lord wishes ...” It's not all about what we want. It's about what he wants us to have, experience, enjoy, deal with or manage.

We are mist that vanishes. He is one who holds the whole scene together and has the whole picture in his mighty hand.

Maybe we've not thought about that before ... that our life and work and plans and hopes and dreams are held in submission to God and what he may want for us?

Maybe we have said our own No to an opportunity he is holding out for us to consider?

Maybe we have said someone else's No for them and not invited them to have a go or take a risk and explore the "If the Lord wishes" route?

My prayer for us all today is that:

We know and live in humble contentment,
We would be known for speaking well
And that in all our planning and dealing we would remember who we truly are, sons and daughters of the living God.

And let's not overlook James' final sting in the tail ... in v17

"Anyone who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin".

James sets this challenge before us ... and offers us not just warm words of encouragement to be nicer people, but to be genuinely submitted to God with all that implies and involves.

Let's pray ...