

Living Faith

James 2:14-24
Hebrews 11:1-3;8-19

At the APCM Jon told us of his vision for this church, he spoke of Living Faith, joyful hope and loving service. Today we begin a mini series exploring each of these values in turn.

What is "Living Faith"? Do we want it? How do we get it? Our main point of reference will be our reading from James. Some of what he says is quite provocative. Recently I heard a speaker say the theme of James is "just do it".

The new Testament letter of James was probably written about A.D. 45; that's earlier than any of the gospels. James was a church leader, I'll say a bit more about him later. The church was running into problems. Church members, who were mainly Jewish Christians, seemed less committed. There was a lot of good sounding talk and loud prayers but that was all. James's letter confronts the issues, it is extremely challenging, then and now!

James doesn't really say what living faith is but he emphasises what it isn't. " Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."(v17).

Faith without action is dead faith? Is living faith the opposite? Does this mean that for faith to be living it has to be good works. But isn't this at odds with other things we read in the bible, particularly the writings of St Paul? He says its faith in Jesus alone that saves us, not works. This is puzzling! I think both James and Paul are correct. We cannot be saved by our good works, we are only saved by the good works of Jesus. The crucifixion of Jesus is the ultimate example of faith in action. Accepting, believing and trusting in what Jesus has done is what saves us. By saved I mean made right with God. We are made right with God by the cross. Thank you Lord Jesus! But it doesn't end there. We are saved for a purpose. We are saved to be God's hands and feet in the world. We are not saved BY good works but FOR good works.

James says "I will show you my faith by my deeds"(v18). The reason James is able to write with such conviction is because he grew up watching faith in action. It is commonly thought that he was one of Jesus' brothers. He wasn't a disciple, it was only when the risen Jesus appeared to him that everything clicked into place. From then on he devoted his life to God's service. James' faith was certainly revealed in his life style. He prayed so much, his knees were calloused and he was known as "Old Camel Knees". It's by our actions that our faith is seen by others. The only reason we can be faithful is because Jesus was faithful.

The Jewish Christians, who James is writing to, were still steeped in their traditions and probably found it very hard to break out of the mindset which told them what they had to do to keep right with God. They had always thought it was necessary to keep away from sinners and sick people. If you had contact with them, helped them, you would be contaminated, made unclean. These traditions stopped them putting their new found faith into action.

So is there a conflict here? V19 is interesting. James is saying "it's great that you believe there is only one God". My commentary says this is a reference to the daily Jewish prayer "The Lord our God is the only Lord. You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength... We know this as the first of Jesus commandments. The second being " love your neighbour as yourself". Added together this is what James is challenging his church to do. These commandments aren't separate, they are one in the same, loving your neighbour is serving God. The Message version puts it this way "isn't it obvious that God talk without God acts is outrageous nonsense! (V17).

These commandments are still relevant. Terry mentioned them in his talk last week. We proclaim them at the beginning of our communion services. Notice the words "and with all your strength" using our strength to serve God sounds exactly what James is talking about. Its the outworking of our faith in physical action. It's Ok to get exhausted serving God. Somehow there is this myth around that if we are fulfilling God's will everything ought to be easy. Sorry that isn't the case. I believe we get a sense of satisfaction but we do need to use our physical strength. There is a saying "faith is like a muscle. The more we use it the stronger it gets".

Two of my heroes of faith are Jackie Pullinger and Heidi Baker. To my mind they are living faith personified. As young women they felt God's call to be missionaries. Jackie to the gang ruled walled city in Kowloon, Hongkong and Heidi amongst the poor of Mozambique. Heidi runs orphanages. Her books tell of amazing stories food multiplying miracles, praying for the blind and their eyes are opened, even people being raised from the dead. Jackie set up safe houses, rehabilitation centres for drug addicts, prostitutes, and gang members, some drug addicts she prayed for were instantly healed. Both women have worked tirelessly often putting themselves in danger to fulfill what they believed God was asking them to do. They didn't just hold services, they lived and worked in the communities God sent them to, providing practically for the people, they were called to serve.

These stories of living faith are mind blowing to me. I feel rubbish in comparison! How can we here in the south east of England make a start with living faith?

Abraham is given as an example in both of our readings. Another biblical hero! Abraham also demonstrated living faith. He believed God, acted on what he thought God was telling him and as a result "he was called God's friend"(V23) How wonderful to be known as God's friend! Is that possible for us? The truth is, this title that is open to us all. Jesus says in John 15 "I no longer call you servants I call you friends". I believe friendship with Jesus is the key to a life of living faith.

Let's think for a minute about friendship. When we make a friend how do we progress our relationship? We spend time in each other's company. We walk, talk, share, laugh and on occasions cry. Why do we think it should be any different with Jesus.

Can we see things differently? Rather than see living faith as something we do, a struggle and another demand, in addition to already busy lives. I invite you to think about it as something we experience, as we allow Jesus to be our friend and walk beside us through life. As we even think and pray about this His life will increasingly flow through us.

If all this sounds a bit strange, don't worry, because as Terry told us last week God is a mystery. Living faith is mysterious ,but equally living faith is full of wonder.

This means that Living faith is the answer when your life feels tedious and predictable, when your relationships have lost their magic. When you long to feel really alive. Living faith in Jesus Christ opens our lives to continual newness and wonder. The deal is we have to accept mystery, the mystery of this amazing grace filled life that Jesus invites us into. As we walk with Jesus, in friendship and gratitude for everything he has done for us, we will grow in Living faith.