

Sunday 16 September, 2018 – 10.30am Eucharist

A sermon preached by the Revd Canon Dr Richard Trist, Dean of the Anglican Institute and Coordinator of DMin Program at Ridley College, Melbourne, on the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost; the third sermon in a series on the Epistle of James:

Reading: James 2:18-26

One thing that people first turn to when reading a newspaper is the cartoon section. Cartoons can be effective means of communication as they often use humour to enable a truth to be told in a powerful way. They challenge and prod us in ways that call us for a response.

I came across a cartoon this week which did just that. It featured a drawing of a church with a tall steeple, wide open door, and stained glass windows. But out the front was a large notice board stating who they were and what they offered. The sign read as follows – “Welcome to the Lite Church – we have 24% fewer commitments and are the home of the 7.5% tithe, the 15 minute sermon, and the 45 minute worship service. We have only 8 commandments – it all your choice. We use just 3 spiritual lawsWe are everything you've ever wanted in a church... and less!”

Now sadly for many people that is their experience of church today – it is church without demands – a place you can attend where there is no pricking of the conscience - no hearts ‘strangely warmed’ - no sense of commitment –no actions required – a place of no real faith.

Now I don't know about you but that's not the sort of place I would want to be part of. I am guessing that we are here today because we want our faith to make a difference. We want to know that God is with us in the ups and downs of life. We don't want to be part of a church lite and we don't want a faith that is faith lite.

In our passage today the Apostle James reminds us of the nature of real faith - faith that is worked out practically in our daily lives and which makes a difference to ourselves and the lives of others.

Now in many ways the passage is a tricky one for it talks about the relationship between faith and good works. Some people read the passage and see what they think is a contradiction between the Apostle Paul and the Apostle James. But there is no contradiction. Both Paul and James agree that a Christian is someone who has been put right with God – justified – not by what we have done for Him - our good works - but because of what Christ done for us – his good works – namely his saving death and glorious resurrection. Saved by grace through faith.

But that does not of course that there is no place for good works in the life of Christian.

And it is this that James is particularly emphasising in his letter. He writes to remind us that faith is no faith at all unless it is faith that is put into practise.

Now the problem that James is addressing in his letter is that some people in the church had been reducing faith to its bare minimum. In the passage just prior to this one James says this:

14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? 15 Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? 17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

In today's passage James continues this theme by explaining the nature of genuine faith.

Genuine faith begins in the heart- vs 18-20

18 But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. 19 You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder. 20 Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren?

In these verses James imagines an objector who has a live and let live attitude to life - says in effect –James surely you are being a bit too hard - can't we see faith and works as two options? You are someone who likes theology and is more theoretical. As for me I am more of a practical person. I am a doer not a thinker.

You can imagine James exploding - No he says - faith and works cannot be separated - faith is not just about mere orthodoxy - believing the right thing – Even the demons believe that God is one - and it causes them to respond– who are you to think that mere intellectual assent is all that is needed.

Note here that James is referring to what is called the Shema - the Jewish belief about God found in Deuteronomy 6:4 – *Hear O Israel – the Lord our God, The Lord is one.* James is in effect is saying - have you forgotten the verse that follows? - *and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and all your strength.* And as Jesus adds, *And love your neighbour as yourself.*

Real faith is more than mental assent to a truth – it a belief that involves the heart and demands a response. It is not only knowing about a God who promises to save, its trusting in a God who promises to save, and living out that trust in practical ways day after day.

In his book “Issues Facing Christians Today”, John Stott quotes these words from a homeless woman written to a Vicar who, when she asked for help, had simply offered to pray for her:

I was hungry, and you formed a humanities group to discuss my hunger. I was imprisoned, and you crept off quietly to your chapel and prayed for my release. I was naked, and in your mind you debated the morality of my appearance. I was sick, and you knelt and thanked God for your health. I was homeless, and you preached to me of the spiritual shelter of the love of God. I was lonely, and you left me alone to pray for me. You seem so holy, so close to God but I am still very hungry – and lonely – and cold.

Friends this is not what genuine faith it is meant to be.

It is only as our faith moves from our head to our heart and from our heart to our hands – in practical and caring ways, that we can be truly fruitful in our Christian lives – As James says ²⁰ *faith apart from works is barren* - It does not do what it is meant to do.

Genuine faith involves a willingness to act – vs 20-24

In these verses James uses the story of Abraham to persuade his readers of the importance of a faith that leads to action:

²⁰ *Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren?*
²¹ *Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?* ²² *You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works.* ²³ *Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” and he was called the friend of God.*

Here Paul refers to two key Old Testament passages from the life of Abraham.

The first is Genesis 15 where having been called by God to leave his homeland and start a new nation the childless Abraham is promised a son by God, and in spite of the impossibility - his wife is well past child bearing and he is no spring chicken himself – he was 75 – Abraham took God at his word and we are told in Gen 15:6 – it was reckoned or credited to him as righteousness.

The second passage is Genesis 22 –takes place 30 later. After the miracle has come to pass, a son Isaac is born and Abraham is tested by God in the most unimaginable way. He is commanded by God to offer his son offer him as a sacrifice. Abraham was facing a stern test - this was the child who was promised all those years before – this was the one through whom Gods promises of a great nation were to be fulfilled.

It is a very dark story but Abraham stands the test.

The faith that he had at the beginning is put into action. What does Abraham do? He continues to trust in the God of the impossible. Hebrews 11 says that 'he considered that God was even able to raise men from the dead' – and when at the end of the story God sees that Abraham truly fears Him – is willing to give his all to God - Isaac is set free and a ram is offered in his place.

Here, says James, is a living faith – Not bare faith – not faith lite – but faith that: ²² ... *was active along with his works, and faith ... brought to completion by the works.*

Note the order here – not faith by itself, not works by itself – but faith and works coming together - faith that began 30 years before brought to completion by Abraham's willingness to obey even when it really cost.

Friends I wonder if you have noticed this about the Christian life. Just as a physical muscles get stronger the more we exercise them, so our spiritual muscles – our faith, our trust in God - grows stronger the more that we exercise them - put them into practise.

A number of years ago I was going through a rough patch as minister of a parish. My wife had been ill, the children kept on getting ill, and I was feeling very low spiritually - I was struggling to stay on top of things, not only in the church but also at home.

Then out of the blue I received a phone call from another pastor. He was an older man who had come out of retirement to look after the Baptist Church. As I talked to him about my situation he told me that very week he had spoken to 3 other ministers in the area who were going through the same things.

Within a week he called us all together and as we shared our common concerns we knew that somehow we needed God's protection over us and particularly for our families. We sensed that the things that are happening were not just a coincidence. We were in the midst of a spiritual battle.

And thus began two years of weekly meetings for us – this strange collection of ministers – Baptist, Salvation Army, Anglican, Assembly of God - all meeting in the front room of my house to talk, read the Bible, to pray, to take whatever action we could to put an end to the spiritual and physical attacks we were feeling.

And as we did this week by week - stepping out of our denominational comfort zones – being willing to share our lives - our faith began to grow –over time things began to turn around.

Genuine faith always involves a willingness to act – to sense Gods call upon our lives and then, like Abraham, to be willing to do whatever we need to do.

In my own ministry here at St Pauls I have seen this expressed as some have left a career to go into full time Christian ministry, others opening up their homes to overseas students, others dipping into their saving to support the Cathedrals mission.

What does genuine faith involve? It involves a willingness to act - stepping out for God even when it seems impossible.

Genuine faith involves looking out for the stranger - vs 25-26

²⁵ *Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road?*

In this final section James comes full circle. He began by challenging his readers about their unwillingness to accept the poor and outcast into their midst and here he tells of someone who did just that.

Gods people in Joshua 2 were about to enter the promised land and Joshua sent two spies to check on the enemy in the city of Jericho. The men were found out but a woman named Rahab who had come to believe in the God of Israel put her faith to the test and offered the men protection enabling them to escape unharmed.

Here is an unlikely example of living faith chosen by James to demonstrate the importance of faith that shows itself in action, and to show how comprehensive this call is to be.

Not just the important people in the Bible like Abraham, but for the less significant ones like Rahab , not just for men but for women, not just Jew but also for the Gentile, not just the respectable, but also for those who feel they are on the edge of society. A call for us all, whoever we might be, to be people of practical faith.

As a Cathedral at the crossroads of the city it is a call for us all to look beyond ourselves and welcome the stranger - the hesitant ones at the church door, the foreign students wandering in, the shut in no longer able to come to church, the refugees, the unemployed, the destitute and needy.

My prayer for us all today is that we find in James words today a challenge to put our faith into practise - to allow our hearts to be open by the love of God, to open our ears to the call of God, and to be willing to serve the people of God, whoever they maybe. Amen.