

Sunday 30 September, 2018 – 10.30am Eucharist

A sermon preached by Mr Philip Nicholls, Authorised Lay Minister and Director of Music of St Paul's Cathedral Melbourne on the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, the fifth in a series on the Epistle of James:

Readings: James 5.12-20 (Esther 7.1-6, 9-10; 9.20-22; Psalm 124; Mark 9.38-50)

First, a warm welcome to Isabella and her family and friends today as they bring her for baptism: we rejoice to be formally welcoming a new member with us of the body of Christ. Second, I'd like to thank the Dean for trusting me in his pulpit, and on such a day. Today we have a suite of wonderful readings to consider, a sermon series to wrap up, and two sacraments in the one service.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Let your ‘Yes’ be yes and your ‘No’ be no”.

Throughout September, we have been focussing on the Epistle of James – we have been reflecting upon what it means to live an authentically Christian life, individually, and in community. Dean Andreas began our series by introducing us to James the man – the person – the brother of Jesus, who knew the living Jesus and knew about living with Jesus in the Resurrection. Bishop Richard Condie preached the second sermon in the series, urging us to avoid falling into sin by favouring the well-to-do over the down-and-out – he extended this avoidance of partiality to the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers; such partiality should be avoided to all the oppressed – all are a part of creation, and deserve to be shown God's love equally. Canon Richard Trist preached a fortnight ago about the relationship between faith and works – about James's notion that faith without works is dead: ‘a person is justified by works and not by faith alone’ (Jas 2:24). Canon Trist warned against setting James's doctrine against the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith alone: he noted that Paul's notion of faith included faith's active display: not only love of God, but love of (and care for) one's neighbour and oneself.

In the context of a sermon on James chapter three, last week the Precentor reminded us that our speech is **work** in itself, and that our work – our speech – should build up and never tear down. That the work of the tongue – the word – is inextricably linked to eternal life – In the beginning was the Word – and that Jesus Christ is that Word made flesh – the Word incarnate.

Today's portion of James's epistle exhorts the reader to “Let your ‘Yes’ be yes and your ‘No’ be no”. What did this mean for James and the early Church? What did this mean for the heroine of our first reading, Esther? And what does it mean for us today?

For Esther, when her yes couldn't be yes and her no couldn't be no, she kept silent. She 'bridled her tongue' in order to save herself and her people, which was effectively achieved in the execution of Haman. Her word brought death to Haman, but life to the thousands of Jews in exile.

For James and the early Church, a complex Ancient-world system of oaths of contract and obedience was being replaced by contracts reliant upon a single act: a word started to become a man's contract, as in, 'he's as good as his word'. And, at the time, it **was** only **his** word: as we know, unfortunately women weren't considered to be as good as **their** word for a few centuries to come. James encouraged the early church to be truthful, to say and mean 'Yes' or 'No', and to stick by it.

The evangelist Mark picks up on this point. John alerts Jesus to a follower casting out demons in Jesus's name. Jesus says, 'don't stop him! If he's telling the truth about me now, he can't very well tell lies about me later on! Leave him be.' Through a series of graphic physical analogies, Mark's Jesus admonishes the twelve to prepare for eternal life in this mortal life by avoiding sin. For Jesus knows that despite physical imperfections, all shall be made new in God's kingdom for the redeemed.

What do our yesses and nos mean for us today?

At the beginning of this month focussing on the Epistle of James, the Dean invited us to reflect on what it is that we had already been doing that helped build family in this place. He also asked us to reflect on what it may be that we need to let go, what it may be that we do to 'deceive our hearts', to make our religion empty and worthless. Have we let go of those works or words? Have we prayed for the forbearance to 'bridle our tongues', to 'rid ourselves of all ... wickedness', to make our yesses yes and our nos no? At the end of this sermon series on the Epistle of James, my challenge to us all is to reflect how best we can continue to build up the family of Jesus in this place. After all, who are my mother, my sisters, and my brothers if not you all?

And, above all, pray. Never forget the power of prayer. James taught the early Church that 'the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective'. If you can't think what to pray, pray the prayer our Lord himself taught us. Pray the Lord's Prayer, consider every word as a meditation, and the Lord will grant your petitions as may be best for you.

Alongside prayer, one of the most tangible ways we can sustain and build up our Christian community of faith is by actively participating in the sacraments of the church. Today, Isabella has been brought for baptism – and we welcome her, her parents and sponsors. In baptism, Isabella's sponsors, a part of our community of faith, say 'Yes' to Christ on her behalf, and Christ says 'Yes' back; we see the risen Christ in the water and welcome of the font; and Isabella enters into Christ's work as a member with us of the body of Christ. Later

in life, Isabella may participate fully in the feast of the Eucharist, which we also celebrate today. With all on earth and all above we join ourselves to our Christian family, in earth and heaven, by saying Yes to it, and to the triune God.

Isabella has been brought to this community today by her family and friends. Perhaps you might think about the last time you encouraged someone to come along to church. A part of your Yes to Jesus is a commitment to bring his Yes to others. Try to think of those of your family and friends who just need the slightest push to come, or to come back to their belief in God, and their membership of Christ's community.

Isabella, we wish for you the wisdom of Esther, the insight of James the brother of our Lord, the immediacy and faithfulness of Mark the Evangelist, and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. May your 'Yes' to Jesus and his 'Yes' to you be the core of your long and love-filled life.

"Let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No' be no".

Faithful God, throughout the generations you have called and gathered together sisters and brothers into prayerful and mission-based communities of faith. Help us to continue and strengthen our resolve as a church bearing Christ's name, treating all equally, observing our faith and living out that faith through works of faith as 'doers of the Word', keeping free from all hypocrisy, and speaking the truth in love. This we pray through Jesus Christ our Lord and in the power of the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end. **Amen.**