

ADDRESS FOR SUNDAY 9TH SEPTEMBER 2018
15TH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

A little girl told a friend who was visiting her father that her brothers had set traps to catch some birds. He asked her what she'd done about it. "Well" she replied "I prayed that the traps might not catch the birds." "Anything else?" asked the friend. "Yes," she said. "I prayed that God would keep the birds out of the traps." "Anything else?" "Yes, then I went and kicked the traps all to pieces!" An apt illustration, perhaps, of that challenging and uncompromising statement contained in the second chapter of the Letter of James - "**Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.**"

But surely that can't be right. Surely belief in Jesus and his redeeming work is the important thing. Surely that's what qualifies us to call ourselves Christians. It's evident from the whole passage which was read to us from James's letter, that the people he is writing to think that way too. They certainly seem to be sufficiently convinced about the claims of the gospel to call themselves Christians; they've chosen to be on the Lord's side. But the content of James's letter seems to suggest that they're simply regarding this as a kind of insurance policy – that the Lord will be on *their* side against whatever ills the future might have in store for them, and having got that sorted, no further action is necessary, and life can go on as normal. But James tells them, in his characteristically uncompromising way, that they've got it wrong. Unless their faith actually changes the way they live, he says, that faith is dead.

Not a very comfortable message, and James spells it out for them to make sure they understand it, by specifically drawing their attention to what he calls their "acts of favouritism" within their own church, where they are giving more courteous attention and paying more honour to rich people who wear fine clothes than to poor people whose clothes are dirty. But, while James doesn't "do" excuses, there *is* some excuse for their behaviour, as William Barclay points out in this brief commentary. He says:

"The Christian Church was the only place in the ancient world where social distinctions did not exist. There must have been initial awkwardness when a master found himself sitting next to his slave, or when a master arrived at a service in which his slave was actually the leader and dispenser of the Sacrament. The gap between the slave, who in law was nothing more than a living tool, and the master must have been so wide as to cause problems of approach on either side. Further, in its early days the Church was predominantly poor and humble; and therefore if a rich man was converted, and did come to the Christian fellowship, there must have been a very real temptation to make a fuss of him, and to treat him as a special trophy for Christ."

So - big social problems to be overcome. But James tells his congregation that overcoming these problems is an important part of what being Christian is all about. They have to stop judging others by accepted worldly standards - because they're not God's standards. God pays no attention to the social distinctions of this world. He doesn't keep in with the rich and famous, or try to find favour with the influential. He doesn't care about financial status, or how people are dressed or the cost of their

clothes. Of course he is ready to love and forgive **us**; but he is equally concerned about the rest of the human race because he is the Father of us all, and loving our neighbours has to **apply** to the whole human race and not only to those whom we judge to be acceptable. It isn't reasonable, James says, to expect God to use one standard of judgement for us, if that isn't the standard of judgement we're using for everyone else.

And then James really gets into his stride! **“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?”**

So the message here seems to be that if we really are on the Lord's side, if we really want to fulfil what James calls “the royal law” about loving our neighbours as ourselves, then we have to forget all about social, racial, whatever sort of distinction or prejudice; and even if and when we manage to do that, charitable thoughts are not enough. Our faith then has to be translated into the kind of action which shows that we really believe in, and want to follow, the one whom he calls “our glorious Jesus Christ.” And I'd be the first to acknowledge that it's easier said than done!

In today's gospel reading, Mark tells us that Jesus is in the area of Tyre. He's probably there for a bit of peace and quiet because he knows that that the crowds, including the troublesome Pharisees, won't follow him into the country of the despised Gentiles. He doesn't want anyone to know he's there, but the news about this young miracle worker has obviously spread over the border. And although Jesus is ignoring the Jewish defilement laws, not only by going into Gentile territory but by going into a Gentile house, when he is approached by a Gentile woman begging him to heal her demon-possessed daughter, his immediate response makes it clear that he's not there on an evangelical mission. “Let the children be fed first” he says “for it isn't fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.”

What an amazing ability Mark has to give tremendously important messages in a few well-chosen words! In those days there were stray dogs in every town and city, savage street scavengers. To call anyone a dog was a deadly insult and the Jews used the term freely in connection with Gentiles and later, indeed, with Christians too. So, is Jesus here guilty of prejudice and discrimination by addressing the woman in such derogatory terms? No! This is where accurate translation of the original Greek is so important. The word Jesus uses for “dogs” is “kunaria” which means not savage pariah dogs but household pets, part of the family, so to speak. So, he seems to be telling the woman that his primary task is to bring the good news of the gospel and its healing power to his own people first; that while all members of God's family are important, just now, for him, some are more important than others.

But he has reckoned without a lady who has obviously given the whole question of the Jewish God a good deal of intelligent thought, and has become certain that this

God has no favourites, and that his provision is enough for everyone, Jew and Gentile. And, in her very insistent need, she reminds Jesus of the scope of God's generous love – that there's enough there for everyone and that they can have it **now**. "Sir" she says "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." And moved by the depths of her faith, and quite possibly by her remarkable grasp of God's purposes, Jesus cures her daughter.

No doubt that incident is very much in Jesus' mind as he moves on, still in Gentile territory, to the region of the Decapolis, where a deaf man with a speech impediment is brought to him for healing. There's no conversation, because the man can't hear; this isn't a time for speech anyway, but for compassionate action. Jesus saves the man from the embarrassment of public scrutiny and takes him away from the crowd to a private place. He puts his fingers into the man's ears, then spits and touches his tongue. In other words, he uses sign language so that the man can understand what is going to happen. Then, most importantly, he looks up to heaven, not only to ask for God's power, but to **show** the man that God is involved. Finally he says "**Ephphatha – be opened**" and the man can hear and speak plainly again. And that's what you might call the result of love in action!

I speak first and foremost for myself when I say that we sometimes need to ask for that miracle in our lives. We sometimes need to be "opened". We are so good at closing our ears to things we don't want to hear; we can be conveniently deaf when there's a call to action; we find it difficult to speak out against the evils in our society because doing so could have uncomfortable results for us. When James says "**beware of a faith that has not visibly changed your life**" we're inclined not to want to listen.

Someone once said "**Faith is the power that you and I have to move mountains – if we are not too proud to push the barrow!**" There are so many mountains that have to be moved – mountains of inequality and injustice and oppression. There are so many "underdogs", and just as Jesus listened to pleas of those despised Gentiles, and acted to bring hope and healing, so we have to listen to the voices of the marginalised or those in any kind of need in our society, and respond with positive action.

More than sixty years ago, a German Jewish doctor, Ludwig Guttmann, did just that. He not only heard the voices of disabled people, he believed that life for them could be revolutionised, and the results of his work at Stoke Mandeville Hospital continues to make that belief a reality for so many disabled people. Anyone who has watched the events of the Paralympic Games, for example, has seen for themselves what faith in action can accomplish. Ludwig Guttmann was a Jew. He, like a young Jewish prophet from Galilee, showed us what James was talking about when he said:

"What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith, but have no works."

Amen