



Revd Ro's Reflection on The 17th Sunday after Trinity

Proper 21 Year B

James 5.13-20

Mark 9.38-50

Now is the time of harvest, the fields are brown once more after the wheat has been gathered and stored away. As mum and I ride out in the country, wagons filled with potatoes pass us in the lane. My own small harvest on the allotment has been a good one and I am busy stringing my onions for storage over the winter. The raspberry canes have gone mad and it is like a jungle but they have produced pounds of raspberries. Harvest is always a wonderful time and when your livelihood depends on it a good harvest is vital. It is a worrying time until all is safe and secure. Growing is a matter of faith; when the fields are brown and seeded. They look barren and dead but the germ of life lies within and next year the harvest fields will be gold again.

I am beginning my Reflection with this because in chapter five of James' letter he says this,

⁷'Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.'

Too often people can read James' epistle and think it is a catalogue of things not to do, warnings against bad behaviour and a set of instructions, that is to over simplify it and look at it awry. James has set out his stall in the first part of the letter, 'Faith without works is dead.'

Let's remind ourselves of who James the Just was. He was the brother of Jesus. He was not a follower of Jesus during his ministry but after Jesus' death and resurrection he became, with Peter, the leader of the church in Jerusalem. He is writing to the members of this church. This is a church facing persecution; it had done so since Jesus was executed. James himself was martyred in AD 62 by order of the High Priest Ananus. These were dangerous times; it was easy to lose heart during persecution, easy to slip back into the old ways of behaviour. But James is saying that these are new

men and women, children of God and heirs with Christ. Jesus has died in love for all who truly turn to him; he has won salvation and freedom for all.

Now these new Christians must live in the way Christ taught. Jesus began God's new created order, it is up to every Christian to work towards that. The creation would be perfected when Jesus returned and there was no way of knowing when that would be.

We all await the coming of Jesus and we need to live lives which are worthy of our calling. James makes it clear that they must wait patiently for Jesus' coming in faith, just as a farmer waits for the harvest knowing that it will come. We know that Jesus will return, we must live fully Christian lives and be ready.

¹¹'Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance.'

Endurance was necessary, persecution was very real but the steadfast love of Jesus was a sure reward.

Our passage today is such a beautiful one. It gives us insight into the early church and the things that are mentioned are still part of the church today.

¹³ 'Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.'

James is speaking to the early church but his words echo down the ages. It is wonderful that James puts prayer at the centre of worship then songs of praise to God. This is worship, our communication with God our Father, giving honour to him.

We see just how ancient the practise of anointing with oil is.

¹⁴ 'Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up;'

I have, in my own experience, seen how anointing and prayer can ease pain and fear.

'Anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.'

This is at the centre of Christianity. The prayer of absolution in God's name is central to our church services. It is vital that the person who has sinned confesses that sin and turns from it. Vital that we try once more to live as Jesus would wish. Jesus promises forgiveness of sins to all who truly repent. He gives us freedom and the opportunity for new life lived in his way.

The Celtic Christians talked of 'thin places' that is places where the divide between heaven and earth was very thin, meeting in fact. Surely that is what we do in prayer.

I want to quote some words of Professor Tom Wright now,

'Prayer is the place where heaven and earth overlap, and at the place where our own present time and God's future time overlap...God is, as James promised, very near to those who draw near to him, heaven and earth meet when, in the spirit, someone calls on the name of the Lord...God's new time has broken in to the continuing time of this old sad world, so that the person praying stands

with one foot in the place of trouble, sickness and sin and with the other foot in the place of healing, forgiveness and hope. Prayer then brings the latter to bear on the former.'

I have quoted this at length because it is one of the most beautiful explanations I have ever read and I think it is worth meditating on this and what it means for us.

When we pray, we pray in faith to our Father. It is part of a relationship of love. We pray with faith and put ourselves, and others, into God's loving care. James mentions Elijah one of the greatest of the prophets to illustrate the faith we should aspire to.

James at the end goes back to one of his themes, faith must be acted out in our lives. To say 'I believe' is one thing but to show you believe in your behaviour in your life is the next step and a crucial one.

So if someone is losing their grip on faith, behaving as they should not then James requires that action is taken to help them and to restore them to the church. James knew at first hand the love that Jesus had shown, the cost of his forgiving love. What we do illustrates the faith we have.

Our gospel reading from Mark follows directly from last week's passage. Jesus had reached Capernaum but had challenged his disciples because they had been arguing about who was the greatest. Jesus will soon be killed, he will rise again but he will return to his Father and the disciples will be charged with the huge task of witnessing to the gospel, taking out the word of God to the world, carrying on his work.. They are at the beginning of understanding if they are still arguing about who is the most important.

Jesus, their Lord and God, will wash their feet before his death. Service to others is the mark of true greatness. Jesus takes a child and tells them whoever welcomes a little child welcomes him.

The disciple who speaks here is John. He is also known as the beloved disciple, the disciple who is closest to Jesus. Now he voices a question for them all. They have seen someone 'casting out demons in your name' their first reaction is to try to stop them, why because they are not one of the chosen band, they are not one of the disciples.

This is typical of the exclusive attitude, if you are not part of our group, you are not part of the 'in' crowd then you are beyond the pale. Jesus will not have that. The point is this person is working against evil; he is doing it in the name of Jesus. Jesus is saying that the motive must be good.

'Jesus said, 'Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰Whoever is not against us is for us.

Jesus has a mission, he is the long awaited Messiah, and he is preaching God's word to the Jews. But just how many of them are prepared to recognise him? Certainly not the Jewish leaders, the Sadducees and the Pharisees are the ones who are using religion as a tool of power and they spend their time trying to trap him. The point is people are divided, those who are for Jesus and are willing to work in his name and those who oppose him, things are becoming polarised, just as things are becoming dangerous for Jesus.

Jesus next words illustrate this,

⁴¹For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.'

Jesus now illustrates his point,

⁴² 'If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.'

Is he talking about the children who are around him or all the new believers or both? I think so because there are those who follow Jesus and those who are against him and the forces of evil are gathering strength. They will be condemned for their evil actions. But all who help the 'little ones' are uniting themselves with the forces of goodness.

The next part of the reading is difficult and I only offer my thoughts. To begin with let's look at the word 'hell.' That is best translated as Gehenna. Gehenna was the rubbish heap that runs past the south west corner of the old city of Jerusalem. It smoked and smouldered continually and 'it had already become a metaphor for the fate, after death of those who reject God's way.'

Jesus is always warning that those who reject him and God's teaching revealed by him are heading for disaster. Think of when Mark's gospel was written, around AD 70. In AD 70 the Temple and the city of Jerusalem were reduced to smoking rubble. It was utter destruction.

We have seen that there is a battle waging between good and evil. These followers of Jesus have turned in faith to him, but they needed as we all do, to live out their lives according to his teaching.

⁴³If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. ⁴⁵And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.'

This is not what we are used to reading, it is not particularly comfortable. It is metaphorical but Jesus is making a stern point. If you sign up for his way you must live it. So these things, hands, feet, eyes are wonderful God given things but everything, all aspects of our humanity are liable to corruption, to leading us into the wrong way. Well it's our job to see temptation for what it is and to reject it. To turn to Christ's way or to risk ending up in the rubbish tip, losing our chance of real life with him.

Every day, we have to make decisions about what is right and what is not, sometimes only small deviations can lead to greater ones. Jesus has to be our guide, the words, 'What would Jesus do?' are very useful.

⁴⁹ 'For everyone will be salted with fire.'

The thing about salt and fire is that both purify. If you have a wound and put salt on it, it will not go bad. Fire purifies too.

Now think of how valuable a commodity salt was for preserving, for flavour, the list goes on and on. Soldiers could be paid with salt. Salt that has the qualities of salt is invaluable; once it loses its saltiness it is as worthless as dust. This is Matthew 5,

¹³'You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.'

So the disciples must be true to Jesus' teaching as must every Christian.

⁵⁰ 'Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.'

It is no good beginning to have faith then drifting away, falling by the wayside.

No doubt Jesus' words 'be at peace' are because the disciples have been arguing over position. It goes back to the beginning and John's trying to stop someone doing good in Jesus' name because he wasn't of their band. The Pharisees thought they had it right with God. They are exclusive in their outlook. We must be inclusive as Jesus was.

It reminds me of the line from the film, 'Whistle down the wind,' where the children think they have Jesus in their barn. The other children want to see him and one little girl says these words, 'We can see Jesus if we want to, he's not your private property.'

Jesus is teaching the disciples that. He came into the world for all humanity; no one must prevent anyone from access to him. We are all children of God and are walking the road that leads to him through Jesus.

'Lord of infinity, stooping so tenderly lifts our humanity to the heights of his throne.' Graham Kendrick

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