

Sermon *James 2:1-10, 14-17, Mark 7:24-37*

Sunday 5th September 2021

I wonder if you were to tell me the story of your journey of faith, who would be in the story, what would be the significant events?

I think it is likely that if we began to share such stories, other Christians and how they made us feel, the welcome they gave us or the care they showed us, would feature far more than any explanations of academic theology or Christian doctrine – I may be wrong in that, but I think its unlikely. Every Christian should have someone or some people who they can look back and describe as having lived the gospel, as being the person who invited them in, who welcomed them, who gave their time, who in some way showed them the love of God in the way they behaved or spoke. For me, I can think of many but I know it began when I was sixteen and invited along to a Christian youth group. There, I was listened to, I found a place to ask all the questions I had without ever feeling that I was being a nuisance, a place where I found unconditional love and welcome, a church that took risks with me and my developing faith. I don't remember a lot of what they said to me but I do remember the time those youth leaders, and church leaders later on, took and the care and love and encouragement they showed me.

We are spending a week or two in James and James is a book which is all about the call to live out our faith, to show our faith in Jesus by what we do and say, not because we believe it saves us, but because how we act and behave speaks loudly of who we belong to and how much we ourselves have received from God. We are to bear the hallmarks of Christ.

And here, in our reading today, James once again reiterates his concern. It is one of those passages that hardly needs unpacking, it is very clear.

It starts, 'my brothers and sisters, believers in our Lord Jesus Christ must not show favouritism'. Later on, 'if you really keep the royal law found in scripture, love your neighbour as yourself, you are doing right. But if you show favouritism you sin and are convicted by the law as law-breakers.' And then at the end, 'faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead'.

He could not really be clearer. We are to respond to others, all others, with the love of God. Be they prince or pauper, old or young, full of faith and wisdom or totally ignorant of faith, like us or radically different to us, whoever they are we must not show favouritism. And our gospel reading implicitly has this message too. Jesus is dealing with people who would be outsiders to the community of faith – a foreign woman with a sick daughter, and a man who could not talk or hear. Excluded the heading in my bible for this gospel passage is Jesus honours a Syro Phoenician woman's faith. He honours her and he then heals her daughter, and then goes on to heal the man, allowing them to be part of the community of faith.

The passage from James is rather obvious in its message – and he is clearly addressing a problem in congregations of his time. The rich, well dressed person gets honoured treatment, the poor person almost overlooked. James identifies this as prejudice and goes so far as to wonder whether people who act this way, showing prejudice, really are followers of Jesus.

It is all too easy to make a judgment about the people we meet perhaps by what they wear, by how they speak or behave, by what we believe their motives to be, by whether they are like us or not, or by how we perceive them to understand the Christian faith and act upon the love of God. We may think that we don't do this at all, we are not prejudiced, but we almost certainly are – and we may not even know it!

James insists that we welcome the poor, indeed that we welcome all, remember who our neighbour is. What motivates this welcome is no high-handed benevolence, no self-satisfied paternalism, but instead the simple fact that we have received unconditional love and acceptance from God and so we offer it in return. We find ourselves made in the image of God and we remember that is the case for all of humanity.

Whatever else we do, we must welcome and care for those who come into this church, or who come into contact with Christians. Everybody has a story, and just about everybody's story, in this country at least, has in it a chapter about the church. Some people's chapter is sadly all too short. It may go something like this.....I went to church once or twice but no-one spoke to me so I never went back. I wanted to get married in church but the vicar said no because.... I didn't feel like I fitted in so it wasn't worth it. I felt that people disapproved of my children, my lifestyle, my questions..... I could continue. Please let us not allow these chapters to be written in the lives of anyone who comes here.

Thankfully, I sometimes get to hear other people's chapters. To be honest it all started when we had our baby christened and everybody made us feel so welcome. I was nervous about going to church for the first time but it feels like being part of a family. It didn't matter that I was different or new or nervous because nobody seemed to mind. I like those chapters. And those chapters tend to lead on to other chapters which describe a growing understanding of faith and awareness of the presence of God in their lives.

We are to welcome every sort or person into this church and into our lives. We are to smile, to love, to care and to forgive. I think it was CS Lewis who said To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.

In the same way we are to love as Christ has loved us, to welcome as God has opened his arms to us. All that we have received from God, we are to offer to others.

I wonder if you think of yourself as an evangelist. Maybe, but for many probably not. But all of us, every single one of us can contribute to people's positive experience of church and therefore their understanding of God's love for them. We may not witness the day they come to faith and make a decision, indeed they may not themselves notice this, but we may be part of their early story, part of the beginnings of an understanding of how much God loves each person and who Jesus is and what the life he offers can be like. In that sense we are all evangelists. Evangelism means sharing good news. What better news is there than to know, not just be told but to feel, that you are loved and welcome?