

James 1.17-27

Mark 7.1-8, 14-23

Happy Father's Day

How many of you know the story of Christopher Robin? On Friday evening, Nikolai and I went to see the movie. The movie told the story of Christopher Robin when he had grown up and left behind his childhood friends Winnie the Pooh and Tigger, Piglet, Eeyore, and the others.

He had grown up, been to boarding school, married, been to the war, come back and worked. He had planned a weekend away with his family, but work got in the way. He had to stay back and work all weekend to figure out how he could save his part of the company. His wife and daughter were very sad indeed. But in the story, Winnie the Pooh, a bear of little brain, finds Christopher again and teaches him about what is important in life, his family and his friends, and involves Christopher, and later Christopher's daughter in adventure!. There is much more to it than that, but even that much is salutary to me and to us, that what is most important in our life is our relationship, with ourselves, with each other, and with our God. Fathers Day reminds us of that.

Our readings today underline this story. They say that people are more important than rules or laws.

How we treat people is paramount.

Jesus says it is not what goes into the body that is most important but what comes out, what we say, what we do, how we listen. The book of James too contains many wise sayings to encourage us.

James says that all good gifts come from God and God is reliable.. All that counts is what God gives. What God gives elevates the lowly. This is very challenging. It confronts our lifestyle.

James offers advice about how we respond to people. It is an aspect of wisdom. Listening is an art.

Listening is not an activity so much as an invitation to intimacy. We are invited to listen to the sacred whisper summoning us forward

into our unique call each moment of the day and our full hearted “yes” to that call.’¹

Listening is also a deliberate decision to leave space for others to be and not to feel we have to fill in the gaps or exercise some kind of control. This includes situations of conflict. It is sound advice that some people have a very strong need to be heard, especially when they might want to say things which could evoke our anger. Often if only we take the time to listen, to hear whatever is being said, we would already take the relationship a step further. We would be saying to the other: I take you seriously. I care enough not to want to push you away with my explanations, defences, my anger.²

Anger does not serve God's goodness well. God's way is about getting relationships right. When anger rules, good relationships are really difficult. When anger is heard and expressed as a means of moving beyond it to what the real issues are and not as an act of violence, then relationships have some chance. This is not just about techniques of survival or strategies about "how to win friends and influence people". It is, God's own communication, become part of our way of relating. God's way is about a process of letting ourselves become whole as we take in what this good news really means. It's good news for us - and certainly for those around us! James is good at attending to practicalities. He confronts self indulgent religion.

James is suggesting that it is possible to enjoy being a hearer, maybe even a believer, and not integrate what we hear and believe into our daily lives.

Frequently we can find ourselves acting in ways that are not consistent with what we now know, because our behaviour is still based on assumptions which we have in our minds long since given up. You have to work at ensuring the process happens.³ It is about integration and maturity. You will learn that, Flynn.

Some people keep reverting to childish patterns of behaviour under pressure, because they have never really addressed their defaults

¹ The Artist's rule by Christine Valters Paintner p 70 Sorin Books, Notre Dame, Indiana. 2011

² <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/BEpPentecost14.html> William Loader

³ ibid William Loader

file, even though intellectually they very well know that such behaviour is inappropriate. Religious ideas are no different. James suggests that such hearing only is like looking at oneself in the mirror. It is very self indulgent. It goes nowhere.

The way forward, is to engage with God in a manner which leads to change and growth.

Notice that in James, God's way is being understood within an overriding framework which emphasises not restriction, but freedom.. Rather than seeing God's way as a set of rules, it sees God's way as a call for justice which gives birth to something new. It is freeing.

It must not be reduced to the slogan, practise what you preach, as if it is simply a matter of putting rules into practice. It is something much more: a way of hearing through which we are changed and in which we also take responsibility for the change process by keeping ourselves fed with what evokes the change, namely the values and insights of scripture, God's word.

The bridling of the tongue is a graphic image drawn from horse riding which is about taking responsibility for the way we communicate. This author has no room for spiritualities which do not affect the way we relate to others. That is not just about avoiding bad things; it is about relating to people in a way which leaves them space to be, which respects their being, which listens. The last verse grounds our spirituality.:

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

True holiness is not so much absence of bad things, as presence of compassion, especially for the most needy.

Keeping oneself undirtied from the world is not about avoiding engagement where we get our hands dirty. It is about refusing to surrender to the dominant values of society, even when they are called "Christian". In the context of James this relates especially to wealth and to the way we treat people.⁴

⁴ <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/BEpPentecost14.html>

I finish with a reflection/meditation from John Bell. you might like to close your eyes...

The Rabbit Hutch⁵

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Then he turns to you and says,

“what is the one thing I can do to make you happy?”

And you tell him.

Now... You tell him.

Pause

And now that you have told him, you trust him.

And you leave him to get on with mending the rabbit hutch for the little girl, knowing that when the time is right,

And even before it's right,

He will attend to you.

Susana

⁵ p27 He was in the World by John L Bell, 1995, Wild Goose Resource Group, Iona Community