



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity

Readings: Song of Solomon 2.8-13. James 1.17-end. Mark 7.1-8,14-15,21-23 | September 2024

This week 27 years ago we were on holiday in a forest villa and went for a meal at one of the several restaurants on site. It's not something we often do but on this occasion we had a pudding; I chose Tiramisu, and was the only one to do so. Minutes after leaving the restaurant I started to feel unwell and headed back to our villa purposefully. And then I ran. I just made it back and to the toilet in time. And I didn't leave the villa for two or three days afterwards. Something I'd eaten had had a devastating effect on me very quickly. So whenever I hear today's gospel this episode comes to mind, and I guess that many of us have similar stories. However we read the passage, "there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile", it is most emphatically not to be taken literally. In this encounter with the scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem Jesus was not giving guidance on food hygiene. But he was teaching us about something that is just as central to our everyday lives.

Put very simply, he is telling us not to be obsessed about the minutiae of religious observance but rather to treat those around us compassionately. If we love our neighbours as ourselves we will not be caught up in "fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly."

He is setting up a stark contrast between religious observance which is about keeping yourself pure and washing your hands of the needs of others, and a dynamic faith which involves getting your hands dirty meeting the needs of others. It is easy to live in an isolated way which appears pious but which is ultimately selfish and indifferent to those around you. And in any case it is generally fairly easy to live in a way which avoids such stark shortcomings as murder and adultery even if some of the behaviours in the list are a bit more subtle such as pride and folly.

The kingdom of God is about enabling those around us to have life, life in all its fullness. This will necessarily draw us into relationship with others, especially those most in need, and it will be challenging and messy. Although pointing us back to the prophet Isaiah, Jesus does not give us specific examples in today's gospel of living in a compassionate way. Thankfully James does.

The letter of James is short and often overlooked but it gives clear guidance on how our lives can reflect the goodness and generosity of God. It has a strong emphasis on works that reflect our faith. Indeed its emphasis on works troubled Martin Luther who famously described it as an "epistle of straw." Whilst he accepted its place in the canon of scripture he regarded it as being in a lower tier of scripture to those he held to be central such as John, Romans and Galatians. We can't be sure about the authorship or date of the letter but it seems likely that the author was influenced by James the brother of the Lord. James is referred to in several places in the New Testament as being a leader of the church in Jerusalem who was stoned around the year 62. The letter attributed to James gives us clear guidance on how our lives can reflect the goodness and generosity of God. The letter warns the rich of the woes that will befall them if they remain

complacent to the needs of the poor. Christian living must demonstrate faith in Jesus not just a claim to believe in Jesus. James urges us to “be doers of the word, and not merely hearers”, “not hearers who forget but doers who act.” Picking up on the thrust of today’s gospel the author expects real Christians to care for orphans and widows. Throughout the letter James berates those who ignore the poor and don’t respond to their needs.

But there is another repeated theme throughout the letter. Time and time again James warns us to control our tongues and to watch what we say. This theme has two strands, being careful about what we say, but also about being “quick to listen and slow to speak.”

James recognises that what comes out of us most is words, and if we are disciples of Jesus the words that come out of us should be wholesome, good words. We should be wary of anger or of favouritism or of pious platitudes to those who are in need. James is right to place an emphasis on words because they not only reveal who we truly are but have an impact on the lives of those around us. The words that come out of Christians will be judged and they should be an expression of who we truly are.

We are surrounded by the words of others. Books, papers, magazines, TV, radio social media and the constant bombardment of conversation are just a part of this. If you walk around half the people you see will be on their phones in conversation about something. Heaven knows what is so urgent about this constant exchange of words, but much of it is uncomfortable to overhear – which is difficult to avoid given that so much of it is at high volume and emotionally intense. At the very least it is having an impact on the speaker and on the person with whom they are exchanging words, and often this will be damaging.

At the moment there is an amnesty allowing people to hand in zombie knives, machetes and similar weapons because of the terrible harm they are doing on our streets. We need to tackle the knife culture which is damaging the lives of so many, particularly young, people in our society. Those who carry knives are likely to use them at some stage and the consequences are devastating. Before too many of us develop a smug sense of “Well of course I wouldn’t do that.” We should remind ourselves of the armoury of words that we carry around with us wherever we go. We live in a world where words are doing enormous damage. Children are being bullied by words used against them at home, at school and on the streets. People who are deemed to be different in the eyes of some are similarly bullied or belittled. We live in a world where lying is taken for granted and carried out so casually it is common currency. And then there is social media where hatemongers unleash their venom. Elon Musk and the like have promoted a version of free speech which encourages a deluge of verbal poison which does harm on an unimaginable level. People suffer and people die because of the speculation, deliberate lies and hateful speech that riddle social media or the comments sections of so-called news outlets. This cesspit of verbal diarrhoea is ever eroding democracy itself. Words are being used in a destructive way whether by government agencies around the world, those who want to shape the world at the expense of others or by social influencers caught up with their own narcissistic obsessions. Words are powerful and can do and do do immense harm as with the recent riots that broke out in communities across this country last month. Blatant lies led to immense harm and destruction which is now resulting in numerous convictions and scores of people going to prison. Even if we don’t go in for large scale verbal assault ourselves how often does our conversation put down others or drift into speculation into others’ affairs which are, to put it bluntly, none of our business? Do we offer complements as quickly as we complain? Do we use words to help others

as quickly as we express our wants? Words are powerful and should be used positively and with care. What comes out of us is what can defile.

As we noted earlier, there is a second strand to all of this. As well as being careful about what words we say, we need to be alert to when we use words. By using less words we create space in which we can be attentive to both God and our neighbour. By doing this we can be more sensitive to the needs of our neighbour and allow them to express themselves. But silence too is a good thing even when we are not alone. We can allow, even nurture silence when we are with others. But also, silence seems to be a currency that is used and honoured by God. Moses, the prophets and Jesus valued silenced and heard God through it, in that “still small voice of calm.”

Today Jesus steers us away from irrelevant pious practice which is ultimately meaningless and distorts our relationship with God. What matters is what comes out of us and is an expression of love of God and of our neighbour. And key to that are the words that come out of us. As James makes clear, we are encouraged to be selective about both the number of words that pour out of us but also to ensure that the words we do use are for the benefit, and not the harm, of our neighbours. Amen.

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