

James 5:7-18 Sermon

Today is the start of Lent, a period of waiting ahead of Easter, where we examine our lives in the light of the coming death and resurrection of Jesus. Often, people give something up for Lent as a way of focussing their minds on Jesus through self-denial. Today is also our last sermon in James, and it is fitting because James talks about patience in suffering, forgiveness of sin, and honesty of speech – all good Lenten themes – though we won't get through them all today.

You'll remember how last week we talked about serving God rather than the world; not being so mixed up with worldly stuff, including our own ambition, politics, and so on, that we get distracted from following God. This was really important in a time where the people James wrote to were living isolated lives, always tempted to accommodate to those around them.

Today, James builds on this, discussing patience in suffering. But the word he uses for patience, isn't quite the same as what we'd think of. In Britain, we are famous for patiently queueing - a stoic waiting without getting angry. This isn't James's patience. James is talking about persevering and not giving up. The reading could quite easily be translated 'Persevere and don't give up, beloved, until the coming of the Lord.' This gives quite a different meaning, and immediately raises questions: what are we persevering to do? What is it we shouldn't give up? And what does it mean, 'the coming of the Lord?'

For the recipients of this letter, and for us, the ultimate hope is in Jesus's coming. This is what it means by the coming of the Lord. The word for coming is where we get 'parousia' from – the word theologians use for Jesus's return at a fixed time. As Christians, then and now, we look forward to meeting the object of our faith face to face in all his glory. We anticipate that day when God who is the creator and beginning of our world, will return to complete it and bring it to its final destiny. We look forward to a world which is no longer fractured and broken and a new age ushered in by Jesus himself.

If we really think about this, we might capture some of the excitement that James is tapping into here. When I was young, I used to be really worried and scared by all the stuff about Jesus coming back. I still am, if I'm honest, when I think about it in terms of some of the stuff in Revelation and in terms of the world ending. But for James, the Parousia is something to be anticipated, to be eagerly awaited; and it's our destiny – the completion of the story of God that we are living through. It harks back to what we said last week about which story we are living in – the story of this world or the story of God's Kingdom. Jesus's return is one of the key features of God's Kingdom – it changes our destiny, but it also changes how we live here and now.

James talks about this in terms of a farmer waiting for his crops to be ready for harvest. There's no doubt about the harvest coming, and yet, the farmer must wait patiently for it with perseverance and not giving up. He is eager for the harvest, but waits well, weeding and fertilising in the meantime. No farmer just sits around having planted crops, but instead he works the land to bring the best crop. This is the kind of waiting that James is talking about. Living within the narrative of a harvest, the farmer acts accordingly, working for the day of the crop being ready. So for us, we live within the narrative of God's Kingdom, patiently persevering for God's world while we wait, never giving up on the vision of Jesus's return who will come to remake the goodness of the world.

James talks about strengthening our hearts because the coming of the Lord is near, and here he uses an ongoing tense in the Greek. God's Kingdom has already started, with Jesus's life, but is drawing

nearer and nearer with every passing moment. That's not a simple statement like my birthday is coming closer every minute; it's a much bigger thing - God's Kingdom takes hold in a greater sense as the day approaches. It's an ongoing progression with results in the present, not just a countdown to the future. Strengthening of hearts is about hope but also about being firmly intentional about preparing for the Lord's coming – doing the work of farming God's world until the harvest, and doing the work of farming our own hearts so we bear as much fruit for God as possible.

James returns to the grumbling that we talked about last week, talking about how the judge is standing at the door. There's a sense in James generally that God is judge and we are not. But here, in the context of Jesus's return, there's no room for grumbling between each other – just like a farmer can't spend the whole growing season arguing with the labourers, they all need to get on with the job. This is less, the clichéd 'What would Jesus do?', and more 'If this was the last day before Jesus returned, why would you waste it with church infighting?

James then holds up prophets and also Job from the Old Testament as examples of those who suffered and were patient, persevering and never giving up. They are commended for their endurance, which, again, isn't a passive 'waiting in line for an outcome,' but is an active waiting. If you know the story of Job, he didn't just sit there and do nothing when he was afflicted, instead he railed against his sufferings, demanded answers, debated, and eventually met with God. The prophets, similarly, often suffered, and yet remained God's messengers to his people for their whole lives. These give us an example of patient waiting.

In the final verse of the first part of the reading, it says that 'you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.' The word for purpose is 'telos' and can mean 'purpose' but it encompasses the whole idea of completeness, meaning and purpose – like a denouement of a detective film, bringing all the strands of the story together into a comprehensive whole.

James, in talking about endurance, says that the *telos* has been revealed to us in God's compassion and mercy. We can endure, very simply, because we have seen the bigger picture. We've seen the compassion and mercy of God in the life and death of Jesus and so we know how this will end. We've seen that Jesus is the judge who will come and restore the earth, and because it's Jesus, we can anticipate that day despite our fears of the imagery in Revelation or our fears of the end of the world, because it is Jesus who is returning in his compassion and his mercy, to bring an end to the wrong in our world – as our communion prayer often says, we look forward to that day, when your Kingdom comes and justice and mercy will be seen in all the earth. We can anticipate that day, but in the light of it, we work now – persevering and never giving up.

But this is only because we have adopted the story of God's Kingdom in our lives. Which story we inhabit is again the ultimate question. To wait for the return of the Lord - working for the harvest and never giving up despite it feeling like maybe it'll never come – is adopting a story which leaves no space for any other story. It interprets our life experience here and now and directs it too.

The alternative is the story of our world where this is all there is. Here, it is all about ourselves, our position, the charitable work we choose to apportion off our time to, the career progression, the special holidays, the friends, spouses, lovers, children, we accumulate, and the enjoyment we have on our short trip from cradle to grave.

These stories are mutually exclusive. If the harvest is coming, and God's Kingdom is here and is growing, then we must be weeding, fertilising, tending the soil, chasing away the crows, and so on, because not doing those things makes no sense at all. Alternatively, if the world is all there is, then

doing any of that stuff makes no sense, because there's no Kingdom and no harvest – as Paul says, we are pitiable creatures.

For James, therefore, it's about which story we live in and then living it consistently. God's Kingdom has drawn near. Jesus has come. Jesus will return to bring the compassion and mercy of God to its completion. This is the best and most life-giving story. Let's give ourselves to it completely as we wait patiently, working and never giving up, this Lent. Amen.