

James 2:14-26 Sermon

Today we come to one of the most controversial passages in the New Testament. Perhaps it shouldn't be – there's lots of shocking passages in the Bible that we need to wrap our heads around, but for many throughout history, it is. This is the passage where people set up the teachings of the apostle Paul against those of James, Peter and so on (for the record, looked at properly, there is no problem between them). Whilst that is of perhaps limited academic interest, it is also the passage where we are really getting to the nub of what our faith in Jesus means in day to day living. There are some really uncomfortable things being said here. We will all leave here today challenged.

And yet, for all the controversy and discomfort, what James is really saying is really quite basic and simple. He is asking the question, 'what good is having faith if it doesn't change you?' The thing is, by its nature, Christian faith is a transformative faith – we seek to be followers of Jesus – and so if it makes no change to our lives short of attendance at church, then we must either be perfect already, or else something is missing. In the other side of my job, working in vocations, I often ask candidates for ordination how their faith has changed them recently, because a faith which doesn't challenge us and change us is a dead faith. This is what James has to say today.

Now, James might be reacting to some corruption of Paul's teaching in Galatians where Paul argues against the need for additional religious customs to accompany belief in Jesus in people who are becoming Christians. We've just looked at this in the Junction. Paul is livid that people are adding extra hoops to jump through to the process of becoming a believer in Jesus. With that in mind, Paul talks about faith, not works, being what saves you. No good deeds can make you a follower of Jesus – becoming a disciple of Jesus requires belief. However, that's a million miles away from saying that your faith in Jesus doesn't need to be accompanied by any change in your lifestyle. And this is the issue that James is picking up here.

Some in James's audience, and many people today, claim that you can profess a faith in Jesus, and then just carry on as before. Life doesn't really change. Faith makes no demands upon us. It's just about believing something, you don't even have to go to church. It doesn't make a difference to your time, your money, your outlook, your plans, your ethics, or anything at all.

For James, this is rubbish. Faith must be accompanied by works or else it is dead. A living faith in God is a faith which seeks change in me, and also involves me being God's answer to prayer for others – hence the reference in the reading about helping those in need of their daily food deliberately paralleling the Lord's Prayer. Simply blessing people in need and then turning away has no place in God's kingdom. Shockingly, James rhetorically asks 'Can a faith without works save you?' – but in this question hidden in our English translation but screaming at us in the Greek, is a subjunctive mood which assumes a negative answer. His question really is better translated – 'Faith without works can't save you, can it.' Faith without outside expression is worthless and dead.

James illustrates this using the example of Abraham, again potentially dealing directly with the corrupted version of Paul's teaching in Galatians that he may have heard being loosely bandied around. He talks of Abraham, who was prepared (quite controversially) to sacrifice his only son in order to do what he thought God was asking him. James also illustrates using the story of Rahab, who risked her own life and betrayed her own people in order to save some of God's people. James also illustrates in a really shocking way using a reference to demons and how they believe, but obviously their belief doesn't produce righteousness with God.

You'll remember what I said last week about wisdom, well, this is also running through this passage. The language of being 'a friend of God' is connected to the Wisdom tradition in Judaism at the time. That Abraham believed, and acted in accordance with his belief, is a sign of wisdom for James.

Putting it all together then, for James, faith on its own, simply reduced to a belief which affects nothing else, is dead and is a sign of foolishness. It is the opposite of wisdom and being a disciple of Jesus. Real faith feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, chooses the people of God over their enemies, and even sacrifices that which is dear to us.

So what do we do with this today?

It seems that to hold James and Paul together we must guard against two kinds of Christianity: the kind that is all in our heads, and the kind that is all in our hands.

Some of us have a Christian belief which is all in our heads. This includes those who nominally claim Christianity as their belief but it makes no practical difference and they may not even turn up to church, nevermind read their bible, pray, or get involve in Christian acts of service and discipleship. It also includes those who are total academics; who can quote Scripture, do their doctrine, come across as really wise and well-versed, trained in religion; but at the same time, again, it just doesn't translate into action. Maybe it used to, back when they learned the stuff, but now it is stagnant. To those of us in this camp, the stinging words of James should hurt us: 'Even the demons believe – and shudder.' James references the Shema, from Deuteronomy 6, where Jews affirm that God is Lord and God is one, and says that this knowledge and good theology by itself doesn't even mark you out as different from demonic forces! How terrifying. Those of us whose Christianity is all in our heads or is a glib identification only need to listen carefully. Faith without works is dead.

But we must also guard against Christianity on the other extreme which is all about action. It's all in our hands. The issue here is that there must be deep faith to back it up. Abraham didn't just wake up one morning and decide to go and attempt to kill Isaac; this deeply troubling act was part of an ongoing walk with God and was carried out in the confidence that God would provide. For those of us who carry out lots of Christian activities, good works, charitable actions, but whose faith, if we are honest, is waning; this is the wake-up call we need. If our kind of Christianity is all in our hands, there is no space for God. For those of us in this boat, often we do what we think is the right thing to do and just assume God is pleased and in agreement. What arrogance this is! Works without a deep, vibrant, growing and developing faith, isn't the dead faith which James talks about. Instead, it is undead – like the twitching of a body when the life has already gone, or like a zombie film where the undead walk without souls. We work without God's Spirit guiding us, but in doing so, we are soulless and directionless.

To guard against a Christian faith of the head or the hands, we must have a Christianity of the heart. The heart is where wisdom, theology, faith and action meet together. Where our faith envelopes us into the story of God's kingdom unfolding in God's world. Where we find our role within that unfolding as dedicated servants of Jesus Christ on earth, as answers to prayer, and as those who love God first and then love neighbour, but recognising that love is active.

Marriages don't work if the couple don't care for each other but simply go through the motions of what is expected, and neither do they work if they say they love each other but their actions towards each other are not loving. Marriages work if they are marriages of the heart, where love and action go together.

As the Church, we are the Bride of Christ on earth waiting for the wedding banquet of God's Kingdom. Let us be lovers of God in heart, not just in head or hands. Let us be embraced by the whole of Christian witness to the resurrected Jesus, and let us never be sucked into the temptations of a dead, or undead, shadow of what our faith could be. Amen.