

St Mary Abbots, Eucharist

Trinity 14

Isaiah 35:4-7

James 2:1-10,14-17

Mark 7:24-end

Are we saved by faith or by works?

This was one of the great debates of the reformation, and for Luther about the most significant. Rather than being saved through money given to the Church, or spent on indulgences, he argued that we are saved through simple faith that Jesus died for us.

The main text cited against Luther was this morning's letter of St James, the brother of Jesus: *'What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?'*

This is I think however a false dichotomy. It is not a matter of faith or works, because St James is simply asking us, how real can your faith be if does not change the way you live, and change the way you treat others?

All of the letters in the New Testament were written to people in a particular context, usually with their own specific problems, which needed to be addressed.

And it seems that the particular problem that was being addressed to the earliest Christians in Palestine, was that the wealthy members of the community lorded it over the poor ones; they expected to be granted the same privileges within the Church as they enjoyed in the world.

St James's letter is therefore not about what saves, faith or works, but is saying that your Christian faith can't mean anything - it can't be genuine – unless it is lived out in the way you treat others, and indeed in the way you see yourself in relation to others.

Think of the parable of the sower – has your faith taken root so that it flourishes in your whole life, or is it resting in stony ground, with shallow roots?

Do you sit in church listening to the lofty words you hear from scripture or from the pulpit - *'Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith'* for example – only to walk past someone begging in the High Street as you go home to your lunch, or to the Ivy, or wherever your favourite Sunday lunch place is?

You may not believe in giving money to beggars. I happen to think we should, but if you don't, does that justify walking on by, conscience absolved, or do you instead sit next to them on the pavement and ask their name, perhaps offer to buy them something to eat from the nearest of our many eateries?

This is not about me instructing you how best to live out your faith – that is for your conscience, but however you do it, if your faith is real it will move you to do so in some way, and in ways which transform both you and those whom you seek to help.

And incidentally, we learned yesterday that Afghan refugees are arriving in Kensington in large numbers, and I would love it if we could not only continue to collect clothing, baby milk, nappies and sanitary products for them, but form a group of volunteers to welcome them and help in any way we can.

As well as being about general charity however, this passage from James is about how we treat others in our church community.

Do those with status in the world also expect special treatment in the church, as St James's audience seems to have given them, or do we see each other all as one in Christ?

I remember at the church I went to before being ordained, which was in a very touristy area of London, there were paid marshals on the door to ensure that tourists didn't disturb the services. Some were very welcoming and kind, but I soon realised that others greeted me depending on how I was dressed.

If I came to church in a shirt and jacket the marshal would step aside and say good morning. Whereas if I came in shorts and T-shirt, he would remain standing in my way, and wouldn't even say anything but just look at me as though asking, '*What do you want?*' I would never respond, which would normally eventually elicit a grumpy 'Yes?'

My favourite example of this kind of welcome was when I was handing out books as a sidesman behind the marshal one Sunday, when a tourist asked if the church was open. He responded rather grandly, 'No madam, we are closed for a Choral Eucharist.'

This is not a new problem – it is clearly as old as the church. Human beings tend to look for other people like themselves, and then stick together. We might think we are kind to those who are clearly poor or homeless, but they are not one of us; they are people to be helped.

St James points out in no uncertain terms that this is not Christianity. The homeless who come in to lie on our pews in the week and to sit in front of the candles praying, some lighting incense or bringing music with them, are just as much members of our community of St Mary Abbots as Mother Emma, me, our churchwardens or any of us. And indeed, the apostles were chosen from among those who did not 'fit'.

And so, what St James is telling us is that our church family should feel radically different from the way in which any organisation out there in the world that we are a member of might feel like. Not only should we feed and clothe the poor, but we must see them as our equal brothers and sisters in Christ, because we are all one in Him.

'Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?'

I know how easy it is to condescend, thinking we are the ones with things to give, whether it is material help or our practical advice.

But we are just as likely to receive wisdom and prayerfulness from those we seek to help, if we will only honour the poor, and not show partiality between them and a rich or famous person who walks in through our doors.

Would one of those Afghan refugees arriving in Kensington yesterday receive the same welcome in St Mary Abbots as Bishop Graham, the Duke of Cambridge or Rishi Sunak?

You may well answer yes, but if you are not so sure, then do ponder St James's words some more; think about whether the poor would also be as likely to be given responsibilities in our church;

and may we all repent of our partiality towards those like ourselves, and instead seek to see the face of Christ in all our brothers and sisters, for we will receive a hundred-fold, from those who are poor in the world but rich in faith, and from our Heavenly Father.

Amen

Fr Christopher Rogers