

True Religion – James 1: 17-27 – a sermon by Richard Shreeve for Sunday 29 August 2021

Let us pray: *Holy Spirit of God, source of knowledge and creator of fellowship: open our minds to recognize the truth and our hearts to welcome it, that in company together we may learn your will and be strengthened to obey it; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen*

Our first reading was written by James who was one of several brothers of Jesus. At first, he did not believe in Jesus and even challenged him and misunderstood his mission. (Jn7:2-5) He was one of the select individuals Christ appeared to after his resurrection. Later he became very prominent in the church and leader of the important council of Jerusalem. He was martyred AD62.

In today's reading James gets right to the heart of the matter of discipleship. He asks, "Who is God to you?" Then he wants to know, "Who are you to God?" And finally, "What are you going to do about it?"

It only takes a couple of verses for James to explain who God is to us. He is Father, Creator, the giver of life and light. God is unchangeable, and therefore dependable. God is truth and righteousness, fulfilling his own purpose in us. God is shown to us in the person of Jesus Christ. I find it interesting that James only mentions Jesus by name two times in his entire letter, and yet every word is about living like we really believe in Jesus as God Incarnate, God in human form, God. With. us.

And that brings us to the second question, "Who are you to God?"

This question is a little more complicated, because in order to answer it, James has to remind us of who we are not. We are not to be people who give in to anger. We are not to be the kind of people who can't control their own tongues, who say things without thinking. Most of all, we are not to be people who deceive ourselves into thinking we are okay with God when our lives give no evidence that this is true.

Instead, we are first fruits. In Jewish tradition, the first fruits were the offering brought to the temple at the beginning of harvest. These offerings were perfect examples of the produce that had been grown. They were given to God in thanksgiving for a good crop, and they served as down payment on offerings that would be brought when the harvest was complete.

We are the down payment of God's promises to the world, James says. We are God's gift to show what righteousness is supposed to look like. We must conduct ourselves as children of God, "for that is what we are!" (1 John 3:1)

How do 'first fruits' behave? It seems that everywhere else in the New Testament, we are urged to speak boldly, to proclaim the gospel at every opportunity. But James suddenly sounds a lot like his big brother Jesus, turning what we expect to hear on its head. "Know this, beloved," he says. "Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry."

Had you ever thought of listening as a form of evangelism? Instead of telling people about Jesus, James tells us that the first thing we should do as first fruits is listen like Jesus. As God's gift to a hurting world, we are to listen to the pain, the need, and the despair around us, just as Jesus did. Just as Jesus still does.

Even more than this, we must be quick to listen to God's word. James tells us to welcome the implanted word into our lives. It isn't enough to sit back and let the word of God run in one ear and out the other. We are to let it be implanted in us. If we are to be planted in the house of the Lord, we have to let the Word of the Lord be planted deeply in us. Not to put too fine a point on it, but if you want the Word of God to be planted in you, you're going to have to open up your Bible, or at least the Bible app on your electronic device, and you're going to have to actually read it. Every day. It will only grow in you if you open that seed and let it sprout.

Because: if the word of God is planted deep inside you, it's going to show up on the outside. Whatever is at your very core is the thing that dictates your outward behaviour. The mark of an authentically Christian life is this connection between inward spiritual health and outward acts of compassion, mercy, and justice.

So if you say you follow Jesus on Sunday, the way you live your life on Monday through Saturday needs to be harmonious with that statement. “Be doers of the word, and not hearers only,” James tells us. In other words, “Now that you know who God is to you, and now that you know who you are to God, what are you going to do about it?”

If you want to develop a faith that really works, you have to work at your faith. Here’s what James says: “If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 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.” (1:26-27)

Orphans and widows, in first century Jerusalem, were the most vulnerable people in society. They had no resources, no social standing, no power. They were completely dependent on the mercy and generosity of others. They were in distress.

Who can you think of in that position today? Who do you know that experiences the distress of powerlessness? Who are the most vulnerable people around us? Those are the people James says we should be caring for if we have God’s word planted inside us.

It’s easy to think, because our church supports ministries like The Little Brothers, that we provide clothing furniture and support the Food Banks, that we are taking care of orphans and widows. And while I am really proud of this church and its work in these ministries, we have to work faithfully to make sure they don’t become transactional ministries. Taking care of widows and orphans means more than giving a handout or dishing up food. It means building relationships and becoming part of their lives, as they become part of ours.

It means bearing one another’s pain. And carrying another person’s pain is hard. It is emotionally exhausting work. Bearing someone else’s pain doesn’t mean that you take it on yourself completely, so they don’t have to bear it. It means walking alongside them and helping them carry that load by being present with them. By listening first, and speaking later, by guarding your tongue, and by not getting angry at the drop of a hat. It means being Christ to someone else, just as Jesus has been Christ to you.

It means living your life in such a way that it reveals your true identity as a child of God. James invites us to look into a mirror and see who we really are. He asks us to see that we have been blessed by God’s gifts, we have been set aside as first fruit, precious and belonging to God.

Churches can be just as guilty as individuals, when it comes to forgetting who we are and becoming inwardly focused instead of outwardly engaged. Somewhere over the past 160 years, we may have forgotten the passion for sharing Jesus that marked our church’s beginning, and we may have become more concerned with keeping the institution alive, than we cared about keeping our faith alive. We may have cared more about our own comfort, doing things the way we like them done, than we cared about doing things in ways that would bring Jesus to the hurting world around us.

As you approach this Table that Christ sets before us, I invite you to ask yourself these questions: Who is God to you today? Is Christ the centre of your life, the core of your thinking and doing and being? And if he isn’t, are you ready to give him that central place of honour?

Who are you to God today? Do you know in the depth of your being that you are loved by God; loved so much, in fact, that God gave his only Son to save you from your sin? Are you God’s ambassador in the world, listening well and waiting to speak, being slow to get angry?

And finally, what are you going to do about it? Will you limit your caring to a simple transaction like writing out a check or handing out food – or will you engage in the kind of discipleship that develops close friendships with the most vulnerable, the most desperate, so that you can carry one another’s pain as you follow Jesus together?