

*Looking in the mirror*

This morning we embark upon a series in which we are going to be studying the New Testament Letter of James, and we must begin by acknowledging that this is not everybody's favourite Bible book. In fact it had a hard time getting into the Bible at all and there have been many who would have excluded it. The great 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformer Martin Luther was one of them – he referred to the Letter of James as 'an epistle of straw' and we can understand why. You see, Martin Luther's great protest was against a medieval church that had lost sight of the grace of God. It had forgotten the Gospel. In Luther's day, what had been eclipsed by the Church of Rome was the simple truth that we are saved by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ. So salvation is not a question of works that are required of us, of doing this or that. It is not a question of commands and demands and imperatives that are laid upon us. No. Salvation is a gracious invitation to trust in Christ alone.

Well, with that in mind, we can appreciate why Luther was wary of the James. For a start, Jesus hardly gets a mention – just twice in the whole letter. But, on top of that, James seems to be full of commands, stuffed with instructions about what we are to do and not do. In fact there are possibly more imperatives and commands in the first chapter of James than in any other chapter in the New Testament. So we have instructions about how we should be more ready to listen than to speak; and there are warnings about being angry; and there are commands to keep well clear of anything sordid and wicked; and we are exhorted to not only hear the Word of God but to put it into practice. And of course much of what James says makes good sense and these are wise instructions for living. Indeed some have seen a connection between James and what is known as the 'Wisdom literature' in the Old Testament, books like Proverbs which give very practical, down-to-earth advice about how to live wisely, how to live well, how to master life, and it is God's will that we should live and be seen to live wisely. Indeed, that is the thrust of our Old Testament passage from Deuteronomy. God has given Israel the law, the commandments and what does God say? 'You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples...' And if Israel lives this way then the world is going to say of Israel, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!' And demonstrating wise living to the world is James'

worthy concern. Yet somehow we can still sympathise with Luther. If the Book of James is simply a rather random list of dos and don'ts, then where is the Gospel? Isn't there something missing?

Well, I want to suggest to you that actually there is rather more to this chapter of James than a list of rules. I want to suggest that there is more grace, more gospel here than might first appear. And I want to take you back to a vital verse at the beginning of our passage, a verse that I think is a key to what follows. In verse 17 James has spoken of God the Father, the Creator who created the lights of heaven, and then in verse 18 he says of this God 'that he gave us birth by the word of truth so that we would become a kind of first-fruits of creation.' Put simply, James is saying that the God who brought creation into being is bringing to birth a new creation, a new world, and we Christians are its beginnings, its first-fruits. In other words, the God who lit the fuse of the Big Bang has now fired a new creation by sending Jesus and we, you and me, Christians, are the first stirrings of that new world. And you might try telling yourself that sometime. James in this passage uses the image of a mirror, suggesting that if we don't act on what we hear of God's Word it's like looking at a mirror and forgetting what we've seen. Well, try looking in the mirror sometime and saying to your reflection, 'you are the first-fruits of the new creation!' What effect might that have on you? Try it sometime – especially first thing in the morning. Try telling that ghastly apparition staring back at you from the bathroom mirror, 'by the grace of God and the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ you are a first-fruit of God's new world!' I tell you, it'll beat that first cup of coffee! It might just change the way you live that day.

You see, this is the key to this chapter. All this instruction about listening more than speaking, and not getting angry quickly, all that stuff about being doers and not just hearers, and caring for the vulnerable – what underlies all these instructions and holds them all together is the good news of who we are in Jesus Christ. 'You are God's first-fruits!' says James. You have been 'birthed by the word of truth' he says. Therefore this is how you are to live! And that's grace. That is Gospel.

Let's grasp this because it's so crucial. The Gospel does not tell us first of all what we should do, how we should live. That's legalism, not grace. The Gospel tells us first and foremost who we are, what God has made us through Christ. The Gospel proclaims first and foremost our new birth, our new identity – who are in Christ by the grace of God. And how we live follows from that.

Think of examples. Think of some of the great and exalted descriptions of God's people, the Church, in the New Testament. 'You are the light of the world', says Jesus. That is who Jesus declares us to be: light in darkness. And it follows - therefore, live as lights! Or again, 'You are the Body of Christ'. What an extraordinary thing to be called! What a title! You and me here this morning, this rag-bag of sinners - yet the very Body of Christ. So live as the Body of Christ! And there's so much more. 'You are sons and daughters of the living God, adopted into God's family'. What? Me? A child of God, a member of God's household? Really? Yes! So live in a way that befits who you are. This is what James is doing. He's not laying heavy commands upon us. He is not turning faith into works. He is expounding the dynamics of the Gospel, reminding us first of all of who we are because of Christ, and then unpacking the implications - how we are to live appropriately and wisely. That's how grace works.

Let me give you an illustration. Let me give you an example of soldiers. Just imagine the extreme pressures that soldiers faced in recent conflicts like Iraq and Afghanistan, where so many of the traditional rules and protocols of war have changed drastically. And imagine a soldier under extreme pressure and tempted to do something unethical - maybe to shoot a prisoner in cold blood. How do you stop that happening? How do you constrain a soldier to do the right thing under extreme conditions? Well, apparently there's a book of rules of engagement and it's massive, a huge tome. And every time a soldier is tested you could just direct them to the appropriate page, paragraph, subsection where they will be told what they can and can't do. There is, however, a much better way of maintaining standards of conduct, a much better than using the book of rules. I'm told that American marines are schooled in four words, just four words which are driven into them. And those four words are, 'Marines don't do that!' All their years of training, all their life together is directed towards giving them a sense of identity, a sense of belonging, instilling in their blood and their bones a deep awareness of who they are as American marines - and of what they do and don't do. The rules are internalised so that there develops an instinctive awareness of how marines act. So if their training has worked they don't need to consult the rule book, in fact they don't even need to think about how to behave. It comes down to instinct, to habit, to character. They look in the mirror every day and they see staring back at them a marine, and they know what marines do and don't do.

Well, that, surely is a metaphor for the church. Church is not primarily a place where you are taught rules to obey. No. Church is a community where we are given a new identity. It's a community where we are given a new sense of who we are – first-fruits of a new creation, the light of the world, the Body of Christ, sons and daughters of the living God. Not marines, no, but soldiers of Christ. And that sense of our God-given identity is the watershed from which there flows a sense of how we live, the strange practices that distinguish Christians. So why do we forgive? Because that is what Christians do. And why do we renounce violence and turn the other cheek? Because it's what Christians do. Why do we resist the god of mammon and care for orphans and widows in their distress? Why are we quick to listen and slow to speak and slow to anger? Why do we aspire to a life of outrageous generosity and graciousness? Why? Because it's what Christians do – it becomes second nature. Why rid ourselves of sordidness and wickedness? Because there are times when we say, 'Christians don't do that.'

What a perfect theme for this Sunday, when we have celebrated our children, our young people, our Sunday School and Junior Church. You see, the gift that we are called to give our children is not a sense of commands but a sense of who they are in Christ, this new identity that they are given in him. Last week in his sermon here John Bell quoted that proverb, 'it takes a village to raise a child.' Strangely enough, in the church I worshipped in last Sunday in Scotland the theme of the sermon was 'it takes a church to raise a child.' And it surely does, because what the church gives a child is precisely this sense of identity. Just as Marines learn what it means to be a marine from belonging to the marines, so a child learns what it means to be a disciple of Jesus by belonging to the church - except of course that it isn't one-way traffic for, as Jesus reminded us, we also learn what it means to be disciples of Jesus from our children. And the goal of Christian education, of Sunday School and Junior Church and house-groups and enquirers' classes and sermons – the goal is that there might be formed in us a sense of who we are and therefore how we live.

So together, child and adult, members together of this community, let us look in the mirror long and hard and let us learn what God's Word tells us stares back at us. Then let's go and live it out. And then maybe the world will say of us, 'what a wise and discerning people!' Amen.

