

James 3:13-4: 8a; Mark 9 :30-37

23.09.18

*The wisdom of humility*

This morning we have had the great joy of baptising someone into this church community, as she has confessed her faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and responded to his call to follow him as a disciple. And it is very fitting that our text for this morning comes from the Letter of James in the New Testament. In all likelihood this James was the brother of our Lord Jesus, and also the leader of the church in Jerusalem in the early days after Jesus' ministry. His is an important role therefore – the leader of the early Christian Church's base community, and we can imagine him having a clear vision for what the church should be like, what it means to be the community of the risen and ascended Lord. So his letter from which we have read this morning, and also last week, gives us an insight into his priorities, his vision. And it's good to plunge into this on a Sunday when someone has joined the Church of Jesus Christ by baptism. What is this community of which Denise is now a member to be like? What are its family features?

Well, here in chapter 3 James returns to a subject he has touched on before, and that is wisdom. James says in verse 13, 'who is wise and understanding among you?' – and what do we mean by wisdom? Well, wisdom is a feature of the people of God in the Old Testament: there are whole books devoted to it, for one feature that the people of God are called to exhibit is a kind of practical wisdom, a way of life that often clashes and contradicts the way the world lives and which subverts and undermines the way of the world. And James is concerned that the church community should be stamped by this kind of wisdom. And what I want to notice here is that in these verses wisdom is described in a way that might best be summed up by the word 'humility'. So the passage we read builds up to a climax in verse 6 of chapter 4 where James writes,

'God opposes the proud,  
but gives grace to the humble...'

This 'wisdom of humility' is described here as 'coming from above', and as 'pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.' And just think of a world that

embodied that wisdom and what it would be like— a place of peace and purity and gentleness, where people are willing to yield to one another instead of always competing and trying to dominate others.

In this passage, however, James also describes a different kind of wisdom, one which is all too much at work in the world. James writes, ‘if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth.’ Here is a wisdom which does not come down from above but is ‘earthly, unspiritual, devilish’ and is anything but humble. What is described here is a kind of a grasping attitude to life, one which is never content, never satisfied with what you have but always striving for more, envious, ambitious, an attitude, says James, that leads to conflict and dispute. So he begins chapter 4 by writing: ‘Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are within you? you want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts.’

Here, then are two wisdoms, the peaceable and gentle wisdom of humility - from above; and the devilish and conflictual wisdom - from below. And what are to say about the wisdom of humility?

It’s been interesting this week meditating on this passage while in our midweek bible study we have been looking at the story of Daniel in the Old Testament. In that story Daniel is a Jew, living in exile in Babylon in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. And you could say that Babylon in the Bible is the supreme symbol of this false wisdom, this devilish wisdom from below that James writes about, driven by ambition and envy and greed and that causes conflict and dispute and warfare. And the king of Babylon in the story of Daniel is called Nebuchadnezzar and he embodies this false and destructive wisdom. Here is a man who is drunk with power and who will brook no rival, a man who builds a great statue, an idol which represents himself and his rule and which people are commanded to bow down to. And despite clear testimony that the God of Daniel the exile is the true and living God there comes a moment in the story where Nebuchadnezzar is walking in the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, and this is what he says; ‘is this not magnificent Babylon, which I have built as a royal capital by mighty power and for my glorious majesty?’ That statement sums Nebuchadnezzar up and I mention him and

import him into this sermon partly because we are looking at him in the Bible Study but also because I think we learn something from him, by way of contrast, about humility. After all, what is humility and what does it look like? How do we cultivate it so that it might be formed in us?

Well, perhaps the first thing about the wisdom of humility that James is talking about is that it comes from a recognition quite simply that there is a God and – unlike Nebuchadnezzar - that we are not him. In other words humility might begin from a submission, a bowing, a getting on our knees before God. Or as James puts it towards the end of our reading, ‘submit yourselves therefore to God!’ And that is something that Nebuchadnezzar cannot do. It’s interesting in the story of Daniel that Nebuchadnezzar is brought to a recognition of Daniel’s God. He comes to respect Daniel’s God because he has seen him at work. But he cannot bring himself to bow before Daniel’s God – until right at the end of the story when he has been thoroughly humbled. And this goes to the very heart of what it means to be human. It goes right to the very heart of the faith in which Denise was baptised this morning. In being baptised Denise was confessing that Jesus, God’s son is Lord – in other words that there is a God who rules through Jesus Christ, and our humanity is fulfilled when we recognise that and bow the knee. That does something to us. It does something to our spirit. We acknowledge that we are not God, that we are not in control, that there is one infinitely greater than us in whose hands our lives and our world rests and before whom we bow. There is, after all, that little part of us, that false self, that thinks it is in charge. And in baptism that false self is sentenced to death and dethroned by Jesus as Lord. And that is one important step along the road of humility. It is the first stirrings of an antidote to that false wisdom that James writes about: the bitter envy and selfish ambition and boastfulness that so easily puff us up and that drive our egos.

But there is something else that we notice in Nebuchadnezzar. He looks out at Babylon and he declares, ‘is this not magnificent Babylon that I have built...’ In other words Nebuchadnezzar had no sense of gift, of what has been given to him. It’s all down to him. He thinks he’s a self-made man! And this is the spirit of the false wisdom from below in James. James writes of the cravings that are in war within us – you want something and do not have it so you commit murder. This is the grasping, avaricious mentality that

sees the world as something to be conquered and consumed. But there is no sense of gift, of undeserved gift. There is no sense of grace, and hence no gratitude, and hence no humility. And people like that can sometimes be generous, and expansive – they know how to give but they cannot receive. Because it takes humility to receive.

Indeed that brings us to our other reading this morning from Mark's gospel. There is Jesus talking about his immanent death – and what are the disciples talking about? Well, they're quarrelling. They're disputing – exactly as James describes. And what are they quarrelling about? Well, what do you know? They're arguing over who is the greatest! Seems they have something of Nebuchadnezzar about them, something of that wisdom from below. And what does Jesus do? Well, he takes a child and puts it among them and says whoever welcomes a child welcomes him. And of course elsewhere Jesus points to a child as the epitome of his kingdom. And what is it that is so special about a child? Let's not idealise and romanticise children, but one thing about them is that they know how to receive. They have to receive all the time. They are dependent on their parents to be provided for them, to make decisions for them, to protect them. They receive the world as a gift which they have done nothing to secure and have no power to control. And of such is the kingdom. And an awareness of gift, of how much we receive, of so much that is undeserved – surely that is a step along the road to humility. Nebuchadnezzar in his pride declares, 'all this I have built!' The humble person, the childlike person knows how much they are blessed. And they are grateful. And the heart of the baptism that Denise has undergone this morning is a receiving – a receiving of Christ, a receiving of what Christ has done for us, a receiving of Christ into the very heart of our lives where he can recreate us and make us new. Baptism is all about gift, and grace and gratitude.

Here, then, is true humility. And let's be clear. This is not about having a low opinion of yourself. It's not about counting others as better than you and despising yourself. That's not true humility. It's not about being compliant and refusing to be assertive. There's nothing godly about that. The wisdom of humility recognises the God who loves us and to whom we bow and submit; and it displaces that grasping, grabbing self and teaches us to receive. But all that makes us strong. It empowers us. True humility is not grovelling self-abasement but a flowering and flourishing of the self as we

find security in God's sovereign love. Or in James' terms: from true humility there comes a gentleness that is born from security; from true humility there comes a readiness to yield to others that comes from strength and not weakness; from such humility there grows a peacefulness that does not need to prove itself by conflict and dispute and by winning.

May God grant that our church community into which Denis has been baptised today may be possessed of that wisdom of humility. Amen.

Holy and gracious God,  
eternal, living Lord.

We your gather people gather here to day  
to give you thanks and praise.

O God you are the source of all wisdom.

Your ways are true and just and lead to life.

And you have shown us what is good,  
the things that lead to peace and to human flourishing.

You have come in Jesus, who revealed to us  
the ways of your kingdom,

the upside down, topsy turvy life of those who follow  
the one who is the way, the truth and the life.

O God we praise you.

Forgive us that we have preferred  
the wisdom of the world to the foolishness  
of life in your realm.

Forgive us that we have been led astray  
by ways that lead to conflict and to violence  
and have turned away from the ways that lead to peace.

O God, have mercy upon us and forgive us, we pray.

Re-clothe us in our rightful minds,

Redirect our steps and refashion our actions  
that our lives may be part of the life of your Kingdom.

People of God, hear the good news that God is gracious,  
God's love outreaches our failure and folly  
and so live the life of the forgiven and the free.

We pray on Jesus' name and in his words we pray together, saying...