

Message for September 12, 2021

James 2:1-10

There was once a young man who had recently left his native land and had arrived in a new country that he hoped to call home. The young man was a very serious individual and had a very keen interest in spiritual matters. He had been raised as a Hindu but, for various reasons, was unhappy with that faith. He'd had some limited exposure to Christianity and being curious, he had bought a Bible and read it. The Bible, and especially the parts about the life and teaching of Jesus, had quite an impact on him, so much so that he decided that he would attend a worship service even though he had never stepped foot in a church before.

One Sunday morning then he got up early, had his breakfast and made himself presentable. He made sure that he was at the church long before the service began and when he stepped inside, he was met by an usher. But did the usher warmly greet him, shake his hand, and thank him for coming? Not at all. Instead the usher curtly told him to go away since he was not allowed in the church; he wasn't simply because he was not white. The young man turned around and walked away but he did not just walk away from that church that Sunday morning, he also walked away from the very Church itself.

He did so because to him there was such a discrepancy between the teaching of Jesus and the behaviour of the usher. He quite rightly assumed that if the church was really following the teaching and example of Jesus, then it would never have told him that he could not enter and worship God because of the colour of his skin. Since the church had rejected him, he in turn rejected the church and even the very Christian faith itself. Indeed years later when a prominent missionary asked him why he disliked Jesus so much, his response was to say that he didn't dislike Jesus at all; in fact he admired Jesus very much. His problem wasn't Jesus, rather it was the followers of Jesus who would not take his teaching seriously. But who was that young man?

Mahatma Gandhi, and this happened in South Africa over one hundred years ago. Eventually Gandhi left South Africa and returned home to India where he, more than any other person, helped bring about India's independence through his policy of passive, non-violent resistance, a policy that was directly

inspired by Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. No one knew it at the time, but that Sunday morning was full of 'what ifs'; what would have happened if that usher had welcomed Gandhi instead of turning him away? What would have happened if that church had really paid attention to what James had written so many years before?

Like last week's, today's scripture passage was also written by James, a younger half brother of Jesus. In the decades following his elder brother's death and resurrection, James became the leader of the Christian congregation in Jerusalem. At that time the church was, for the most part, made up of such as slaves, the poor and the outcasts. To belong to the church was not fashionable; in fact it was the exact opposite. As time went by though, attitudes began to change. More and more people including the well-to-do, realized that these Christians were on to something good and so more and more of them started dropping in on the Sunday morning worship services.

Naturally this thrilled the congregation. It was good to get any visitors at all, but it was even better to get these socially respectable visitors with their nice clothes and gold rings! These visitors were fussed over but this behaviour infuriated James because of the double standard. When the well-to-do showed up, they were fussed over and given the best seats but when the poorer visitors showed up, they were told to sit on the floor. The Christians were making distinctions amongst themselves, and James firmly believed that this was completely and utterly wrong. More than anything else, Christians were supposed to obey the 'Royal Law', which we today call the Great Commandment. "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. And you shall love your neighbour as yourself." Love of God and neighbour was what the church and even Christianity itself was all about and this meant treating other people as they themselves wished to be treated. Would they have liked it if they had showed up at church for the first time and had been told to go and sit on the floor while seeing other people being fussed over and given the best seats in the house? Not very likely! More than anything else the Christians were to love, and if they truly loved then there wouldn't be any partiality or favouritism; everyone, absolutely everyone, would be equally welcome and treated the same.

I have never forgotten a minister's children's time at an anniversary service at Omagh years ago. During it the guest minister asked the children

who the most important person or people in the church were. The children had all sorts of answers and at the end of his message the minister told them that they were the most important of all; they were simply because they were the church's future. Now I know what that minister was driving at and to a point, I agree. Children are important; they are in their own right, and also because they are the church's future. As it has been said, the church is always one generation away from extinction. Where I found myself disagreeing with him though, was with his assertion that the children are the *most* important, with the stress being on the word 'most'.

In the church there is no *most* important. Children are not more important than adults, nor are adults more important than children. Men aren't more important than women, nor is it the other way around. The Session is not more important than the Board of Managers or vice versa. Certainly, the minister isn't the most important of all either. Within the church there isn't any 'most' important for the truth is that we are all equally important. In fact, love does not allow for any 'most' important.

To use an analogy, we can think of the church as being like a family. Would we ever say that some members of our families are more important than others? No, all are valued simply because they are a part of the family. While his language is certainly dated because of our use of inclusive language, I like William Barclay's vision of what the church can and should be like, bearing in mind that when he used the word 'man', Barclay actually meant everyone. As he wrote back in the 1950's:

"The Church must be the one place where all distinctions are wiped out. There can be no distinctions of rank and prestige when men meet in the presence of the King of glory. There can be no distinctions of merit when men meet in the presence of the supreme holiness of God. In his presence all earthly distinctions are less than the dust. In the presence of God all men are one."

Truly in the presence of God, and within his church, we are all one, equally valued and equally important. So said James, and while we may not realize it or appreciate it, what he wrote has had a direct impact upon what is happening in our country right now.

We are of course in the midst of a national election. The right to vote and indeed the idea that we are all equal before the law regardless of our race,

income, education, or anything else, is one of the most cherished ideals of our society. That we do in fact believe this though is in no small part due to the impact of Christianity and, more specifically, today's scripture passage.

We may not realize it but James' insistence on equality within the church and, by implication, outside of it, was revolutionary at the time and still is today. Truly, as I wrote in one of my messages a few weeks ago, this belief about the equality of all makes us members of one of the most radical and revolutionary institutions in the world. People may like to look at the church and dismiss it as being irrelevant and old fashioned with no meaning for our modern world, but nothing could be further from the truth. If we take our faith seriously then we are amongst the greatest radicals and revolutionaries of all time. We are simply because Christianity believes that everyone, regardless of their race, colour, social status, wealth, or anything else is equally loved by God and so equally important. Perhaps it is no wonder then, that there was debate about including James' letter in the Bible in the first place, and that some people down through the ages such as Martin Luther wanted it removed altogether. Maybe, just maybe, James with his radical claims can be a little bit 'too hot to handle'.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, hear us as we come to you in prayer on this late summer day.

We thank you for the gift of this day, and that you have created us to be a part of your glorious creation. We pray that your creation may be all the better for our being a part of it. We thank you for everyone and everything that makes this day a gift to be treasured, praying for the well-being of all those dear to us and that of your very creation itself.

We thank you for the holy mysterious wonder that is you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We thank you for making yourself known to us in so many different ways, but above all we thank you for your greatest self-revelation of all, your Son. We thank you for his life, teaching, death, and resurrection and all that they mean for our lives, now and forevermore. In gratitude for all that you have

done and made possible for us, help us as best we can to follow his teaching and example.

We pray this morning for the sake of all of your Son's disciples everywhere, and your church as well as she strives to minister in these difficult and challenging times.

We pray for the well-being of our children and young people on their return to school as the pandemic continues. We pray for all who are ill and all who mourn the losses of the past year and a half. We remember too those people, rightly or wrongly who are filled with anger and even rage at what is happening in their lives. As the election continues, we thank you that we do have the right to vote, praying for the safety and well-being of all of the candidates willing to stand for office.

Today we remember James' vision of what the church, and by implication, what even the world itself could and should be like. Through your Spirit, help us to help make James' vision a reality so that this life may truly be a foretaste of the life yet-to-come. We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen