

Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 20 June 2010 (Year C)
James 4.1-11, 5.1-11

I confess that I've never been very enthusiastic about the Epistle of James, and do not think I have ever preached from it before. It has its good moments, but there's too much moralising for my taste, and it makes me feel bad about myself. After all, what's so wrong about a bit of over-indulgence here or there, in comparison with the crimes and wars of others? For example, James insists that the tongue is a raging inferno and that if we could only control our tongues completely we would reach perfection. In the University of Oxford, where I work, gossip is the great lubricant and I can't imagine a social gathering without it, the juicier the better. It's often said that in Oxford a secret is defined as something you only tell one person at a time, even if you have received it in the strictest confidence. I've lost count of the number of times I've kept my mouth shut only to be relayed the same secret by someone else a few hours later. This week, I have been a good boy, because I knew the result of the election to the Professorship of Poetry, which seems to excite such media interest, twenty-four hours beforehand, because I had to check it and announce it, and there was no leak. So I find I get irritated about James's insistence on being well behaved at all times, and his view of our life as a slippery slope, one foot on which sends us tumbling into the abyss.

On further reflection, however, I have come to appreciate that it may be these very aspects of the Epistle which may be its greatest strengths and the most rewarding to consider. Here are three of them. First, it is a book which exists in real continuity with the Jewish and the early Christian worlds, and may teach us something about how we are to deal with the relationship between different faiths, especially when they have a long history of mutual hostility. Second, it is particularly close to a part of the Hebrew Scriptures, the books known collectively as Wisdom literature, which, with one exception, we neglect. It may therefore offer us a distinctive vision of how to negotiate the difficult relationship between the world of the faith we profess and the world we know. Third, it takes an apparently different stance on the question which so exercised Luther and the Reformers: are we saved by faith in what God has done for us, or by our efforts to respond to this gift? It therefore sets up an interesting and potentially fruitful dialogue with other parts of the New Testament, especially the Epistles of Paul, and by doing so shows us that the Bible is not monochrome, but a book of many witnesses who do not always emphasize the same things. I'd like to say something about each of these areas, before returning to where I began, with tongues and over-indulgence and slippery slopes.

Many scholars have pointed to the Jewishness of James, to its relative lack of

specific reference to Christianity, and to its probable readership as Jewish rather than Gentile. In this respect, it's interesting to note that it follows the Epistle to the Hebrews, perhaps the most difficult of the epistles for the modern mind, based as it is on what may seem to us a very convoluted interpretation of a series of Old Testament texts and characters. There seems to have been some tension in the early Christian Church between Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus. Gentiles had come from a world of idolatry and immorality, whereas Jews already worshipped the one God and followed his divinely instituted Law. But that was nothing compared with the rise of virulent anti-Semitism once Christians gained political power and heaped abuse and persecution on the Jews. It took the genocide of the Nazi terror to open the Church's eyes to how easily its own theology, which had branded the Jews as the murderers of Christ, had fed those flames and given justification to those horrors. At least two members of this small church come from Jewish families which suffered the consequences. Theology after the Holocaust could never be the same, and Christians, complicit or not in it, felt obliged to reexamine the whole question of the relationship with their Jewish forbears. One of the consequences is that New Testament scholarship itself during the past few decades has emphasized the Jewishness of the teachings of Jesus, how closely they follow well established rabbinical patterns. Interestingly, James is full of echoes of those teachings, and especially the Sermon on the Mount. One of my first duties as Senior Proctor was to attend a synagogue service in Oxford and to say a few words at supper afterwards, following an incident the previous term in which a Yemeni student had wrongly been reported as having shouted out 'Kill the Jews!' in Arabic at a meeting in the Oxford Union addressed by the Deputy Prime Minister of Israel. I was able to draw attention to the heritage of faith which Jews and Christians share, to our common love of the Psalms, and to the centrality of the Jewish Scriptures for Christians, rather than engage in the kind of bitter polemics which characterised Christian-Jewish relations for so many centuries. James witnesses to the importance of first looking for the common ground we share with other faiths, rather than going in with guns blazing to force them into submission to ours. When we have established the common ground and learned to respect one another, we can then discuss the differences between us in a spirit of openness and humility.

My second point concerns James's links with the biblical Wisdom literature. In our ordering of the Bible it is found in Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon. With the notable exception of the Psalms, we tend to neglect these books, which means that we shy away from the extended meditation on undeserved suffering and the righteousness of God in Job, the sense of bleakness and futility of human endeavour in Ecclesiastes, the practical advice for daily living in Proverbs, the

beautiful hymn marriage, human and divine, in Solomon's Song. Perhaps we are more moved by the miraculous and the extraordinary, or by the prophetic voice (by no means absent in James) and forget that the way of Jesus is rooted in the ordinary and everyday circumstances of people's lives. The figure of Wisdom herself - and she is feminine - as God's companion and co-worker in creation should command our attention, in part because hers is a feminine voice but mostly because she should contribute to our theology of creation, which is not limited to the opening chapters of Genesis. Maybe I shall return to her another time. One of the things the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University says in his introductory speech at degree ceremonies, before we lapse into Latin, is 'what you know is not as important as what you do with what you know'. This can properly be applied to belief: 'What you believe is not as important as what you do with what you believe'. That is certainly the view of James, as it is of the author of the Epistles of John, who is very clear that if you say you love God and yet hate your brother or sister you are a liar. How do we work out the implications of what we believe for the way we live? How are we to translate the Gospel themes which inspire us into ways of living which are Christlike? These are the ideas with which James is wrestling. Belief counts for nothing if it is detached from action. In many ways his words are in continuity with the critique made by the ancient prophets as by Jesus himself of religious observance which is all outward show and ritual and which is blind to the demands of justice and compassion. His words on those who pile up their own riches at the expense of the poor, whom they defraud of their wages, have lost none of their edge in the modern world.

It is this insistence on putting faith into action which leads to the third of my points. James's own take on the relationship between faith and works may or may not be an attempt to correct Paul's theology, but it shows us that the New Testament itself is a dynamic book, one which, like the Old, contains unresolved arguments within itself, not simply a series of answers to be looked up when in doubt. Some people worry about what they think of as contradictions within the Bible and spend time and trouble attempting to resolve them in order to preserve a view of the text as infallibly inspired which is a curious and rather modern idea and out of keeping with the history of biblical interpretation through the ages. I heard a marvellous sermon last Sunday by the Jewish writer Howard Jacobson, in which he pointed out that it was the advance of a scientific and mechanistic understanding of the world and its inhabitants in the nineteenth century which led some Christians to try to turn the Genesis stories into something they had never been before, a literal alternative to this new knowledge. Others think that it was the rise of this literalism which has led some scientists, like Richard Dawkins, into their own fundamentalist ghettos. But Scripture is a place of debate about the really important questions, who we are, what God is like, how we

can live in meaningful and creative ways. It raises them in different ways at different times and gives a range of answers for us to consider. I won't now go into the great Reformation controversies about justification by faith, except to say that we humans are very good at turning what are different emphases into polar opposites, at insisting that the choice is either/or and not both/and. There is no actual contradiction between James and Paul on works and faith if you attend to the context of the arguments they are developing. Paul wants us to understand that we cannot save ourselves by our good deeds, but that does not mean that good deeds which flow from our union with Christ have no place. James wants his readers to understand that they are called to bear the fruits of their faith in their lives, but he is also clear that it is the wisdom which comes from above which makes them possible.

Despite my reservations, then, I have come to a deeper appreciation of the special place James has in the Bible. Even if he makes me feel bad about tongues and over-indulgence and slippery slopes, I have a sneaking suspicion he is right. A single spark can set a forest ablaze; the thoughtless comment about people who are different can stoke the fires of prejudice and do untold damage to the fabric of society. What begins as the heaping of blame on ethnic minorities in order to deflect it away from our own responsibilities can so quickly turn into persecution and violence on unimaginable proportions. Look at whom Jesus most consistently criticises, and it is people who think they are pleasing God. Look at whom he most consistently befriends, and it is those on the margins of respectability. May we look, and pray, and learn.