

Sunday 29th August 2021
The Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity
Reflection on James 1:17-27 by Mark

A few weeks ago I was part of an online event at which we were invited to spend fifteen minutes looking at just one painting. We were led by someone who knows a lot more about art than I do, but there was plenty of time for us simply to look, and to look carefully.

I love looking at paintings, but I have to confess that I am one of those people who has a quick look and then moves on.

Years ago, when I lived in London, I would occasionally visit the National Gallery. I would walk around, but there would always be a few people who were not moving at all. They would sit in front of just one painting and look at it intently for a long time.

And I have no doubt that they saw many things that I missed and that their experience was far richer than mine. But even in that recent fifteen minutes I saw more than I might have done. I say this because James, the writer of today's Bible reading, invites us to look intently at God's word. In fact, the theme of God's word runs right through this reading.

But I guess that if I say, "This passage is all about words," your inner teenager will be crying out, "Boring!"

Instead, let me ask a few questions:

Are you interested in life? Do you wish that instead of getting older you could get newer? Do you want to be saved from a meaningless life that just ends in death? Or would you be interested in a living a meaningful life that leads to an even fuller life?

Are you interested in being free and living a life of true freedom?

Are you interested in being blessed by God? And would you like your life to be a blessing to other people?

I don't think that there is anything boring about these questions. And in this reading James links all of these things to God's word: new life, salvation, freedom and blessing.

Our God loves to speak. At the very beginning God spoke. He can speak from heaven; he can speak by his Spirit to us on earth; and when he came to earth, he not only spoke words but he was the Word, the Word made flesh.

At points in history, he has spoken to particular individuals in a particularly powerful way—he spoke to Moses face to face as a man speak to a friend. Some of those individuals were commissioned to write God's word, the written word of God in the Bible. One of those chosen individuals was James.

The reading we had today is in four paragraphs. Let's have a quick look at each one.

The first one is where we find new life. Look at verse 18:

¹⁸He [the Father,] chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

Birth here is not just our natural birth. When we come to Jesus, the Word made flesh, we are born again. The good news about Jesus comes to us through spoken and written words.

Birth is about new life. In this birth we are being re-made, re-newed. And we are like firstfruits because God isn't finished. Ultimately, God is going to renew the whole creation. Jesus' resurrection was the start; our new birth points towards our resurrection.

In the next paragraph of the reading, we are challenged about our own use of words. Words are a gift from God given to the creatures he made in his image. He has also enabled us to listen to words. So how do we use the gifts of speech and listening? This is how James challenges us:

¹⁹My dear brothers [and sisters], take note of this: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry...

Sometimes when we are angry we hold it in, but very often our anger spills out in words. James says:

²⁰*[Our] anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.*

And then he brings it back to God's word:

²¹*Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent, and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.*

And this is where the word is linked to salvation. Salvation is a big topic, but one short version is to see two different ways in which to live— two different paths to take. A person can live a worldly, selfish life that leads to death; or a person can live in Christ's love, and live towards eternal life. To be saved by God, is to switch from one track to the other. James tells us...

...humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

Last week, when we were looking at the armour of God, we had the word of God as a sword. I said that an unread Bible was a blunt sword and that reading it made it sharp. I think that James would have corrected me. For him, reading is not enough. We have to take on board what the word says.

Our third paragraph begins:

²²*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*

And then this great image:

²³*Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.*

And it's in this paragraph that we are urged to look intently into the word. Part of the written word of God is the law. For a Jewish man like James, the law meant all of the first five books of the Bible.

And the result of looking intently will be freedom and blessing.

²⁵*[The person] who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it – he will be blessed in what he does.*

The last paragraph of our reading links back to what we have already read. The first sentence goes with what James said about our own words:

²⁶*If anyone consider himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.*

And then, the last verse of our reading, is just one example of what happens when we read the word and do what it says:

²⁷*Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*

The person who does what the word says will be a blessing to other people.

I started with the event I had attended recently at which we had been invited to spend fifteen minutes looking at a painting. I want to end by asking whether you would be prepared to spend fifteen minutes looking intently at God's word.

Fourteen-and-a-half minutes (14 minutes, 24 seconds for the mathematicians) is just one percent—a one-hundredth part— of twenty-four hours. If you spend just one percent of your life looking intently at the words of the Bible, I am confident that it will enrich the remaining ninety-nine percent.

Many of you, I know, do this already, and I hope that you experience all the things we have seen in God's word today: new life, salvation, freedom and blessing.

It is likely, though, that there are one or two here who rarely open their Bibles at home. I really want to encourage you to give it a go. And I hope and pray that you too will find new life, salvation, freedom and blessing.