

## **Sermon at St Marks Camberwell, 4 July, 2010.**

### **Reading: James 1: 12-18**

St James is thought to have been a brother of Jesus, and leader of the early Christian church in Jerusalem. The first Christians in Jerusalem were persecuted by Jews, particularly for proclaiming that Jesus was the promised Messiah. The Jews expected the Messiah to be a powerful man who would rid their nation of foreign powers and establish a kingdom of righteousness. Jesus, by contrast, was weak and humble and was executed by the Romans. When Stephen declared that Jesus was the Messiah, the Jews stoned him to death. To escape such persecution, many Jewish Christians left Jerusalem to live in other cities around the Mediterranean. But their persecution did not stop: Jews in many of those cities attacked them, as St Paul found in Thessalonica and Corinth for example, when he went to visit them and preach the gospel.

James's letter is addressed to the Jewish Christians "scattered among the nations." (1:1) It begins by acknowledging their persecution, and encouraging them to persevere in their faith. The temptation they faced was to renounce their faith in Jesus, and resume their original Jewish traditions. After all, the Jews were following laws that God have given to Moses and the prophets. Why risk one's life and happiness for this new religion proclaiming the divinity of Jesus?

The reason for remaining faithful to Jesus, James writes, is that those who do so "will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him." (1:12) It is that promise that I wish to discuss today.

Christians in our society are not persecuted, thank heavens, but they are sometimes mocked by atheists for believing in an invisible God who often seems very remote from them. As for thinking that a man like Jesus is divine, that can seem very confusing, something it would be simpler to deny. It is quite natural for Christians today to wonder whether they should persevere in their faith.

James points out that the decision whether to retain one's Christian faith and practice is not just a matter of convenience or personal preference. Rather it is a matter of spiritual life or death. Those who live by their Christian faith will receive a "crown of life", whereas those who live by their own desires will be led into sin and spiritual death.

What did St James mean by a "crown of life?" Saints Paul, Peter and John write in the New Testament of a crown of life being a reward for keeping the faith, bestowed upon the faithful after they have died, possibly by Jesus at his second coming.

(I Cor.9:25ff; I Peter 5:4; Rev. 2:10.) The crown is a symbol of their glory in heaven. This would have been reassuring to Christians who were persecuted for their faith. Indeed it is also reassuring to us when we face our own death.

However, there is a second aspect to the crown of life. When James writes about "the crown of life" he means the glory that comes from sharing in God's own life, the life of the Holy Spirit, given to those who love him. St Paul said that possession of the Holy Spirit was a condition for enjoying life in heaven. James clearly has this in mind when he contrasts a life of sin, which leads to spiritual death, with a life of faith, whose reward is the eternal life of

God's Holy Spirit. He calls those who receive the Holy Spirit of God "the firstfruits of all he created." (1:18)

The observation that sin leads to spiritual death is first made in Genesis ch.3. You remember that there were two trees in the garden of Eden: one bore knowledge of good and evil, and the other was the tree of Life. Adam lost his innocence by disobeying God and yielding to the temptation of Eve to take the fruit of the first tree, thereby acquiring first hand knowledge of good and evil. God banished him from the garden, and then it says "he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life." (Genesis3:24) Those who live in sin are denied access to eternal life.

This message of Genesis is as true today as it was for Adam and Eve. If we live in sin, we are also unable to enjoy the Life of God. When we think of sin, we often recall the seven deadly sins. Adam and Eve were led away from God by sexual desire, but the other sins are just as dangerous: anger, greed, laziness, pride, envy and gluttony. Isn't there a bit of all of those in most of us?

A particular temptation for Christians, I think, is to let righteous indignation turn to hate. When I studied the life of Martin Luther King, I was particularly struck by his care for the souls of the whites who discriminated against the blacks and for the souls of his black followers, who were being organised to oppose them. It was very tempting for the blacks to use violence against the whites. But King, following Mahatma Ghandi, developed a method of passive resistance. He wrote (on 23 July 1956):

...in this method, the non-violent resister seeks to lift or rather to change the opponent, to redeem him. He does not seek to defeat him or to humiliate him. And I think this is very important, that the end is never merely to protest but the end is reconciliation.. Another basic factor in the method of non-violent resistance is that this method does not seek merely to avoid external physical violence, but it seeks to avoid internal violence of spirit. And at the center of the method of non-violence stands the principle of love.. This is the point at which the non-violent resister follows the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, for it is this love ethic that stands at the center of the Christian faith. ("Non-Aggression Procedures to Interracial Harmony."

To keep his demonstrators from becoming angry with the whites, he conducted practice sessions in which people abused them and threatened them, and they learned not to reply or hit back. Every volunteer had to sign a Commitment Card on which he pledged to meditate on the life of Jesus, and to walk and talk in a loving, Godly way. [Why We Can't Wait, p. 61.]

James said, keeping away from sin is important because sin leads to spiritual death.

Why does sin lead to spiritual death? Because while we obey dictates of our own desires, we are deaf to the will of God. But those who repent of their sins and submit to God's authority can receive his Holy Spirit. The Tree of Life is a symbol of the life of God himself. God's absolutely good, holy life was manifest in the life of Jesus, and it was bestowed on his disciples as God's Holy Spirit. James says that anyone who loves God, that is, anyone who honours Jesus and obeys him, will be endowed by God with his Holy Spirit, spiritually reborn with a new, good, holy life, which will take him to heaven. As Jesus said to

Nichodemus: “no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water [for the washing away of sin] and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.” (John 3:5-6) Born again Christians are those who have received God’s Holy Spirit, who animates their lives.

So James is pointing out to the Jewish Christians, to renounce your faith in Jesus is not a trivial matter. It could result in your spiritual death, both in this world and the world to come. Faithful Christians, on the other hand, will enjoy the crown of eternal life.

At this point you might say, well this is all very interesting, but what exactly is the Holy Spirit of God that you keep talking about? What, if you like, are His distinguishing characteristics?

I think the best way to describe the Holy Spirit is by saying that He is God’s particular word for each one of us, at the present time and place in which we find ourselves. But, you might reply, isn’t the Bible God’s word to us? Well yes it is, it seems to have been divinely inspired. It points out that God has expressed himself by creating the natural world; and he spoke to Moses, giving him the ten commandments which are still valid; and finally he spoke to us through Jesus, who taught his disciples about God’s wish that we should love him and one another self-sacrificially, and then showed us how that was done.

Notice, incidentally, how St John equates the word of God with his life and with truth. He opens his gospel with these famous words:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. ...The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1-4, 14)

There are limitations, however, with the word of God found in the Bible. The laws given to Moses, and even the summary of the law provided by Jesus, to love God and our neighbours as ourselves, provide only general guidance as to how we should behave. They can certainly check us if we behave badly. If we murder or steal, the laws of Moses tell us that is contrary to God’s will. If we fail to honour God and to love our neighbours, we know that we are not conforming to Jesus’ commands. But the laws do not tell us what we should do just now, about the particular circumstances that confront us.

God’s Holy Spirit prompts us to perform particular actions, according to God’s plan for us, hour by hour and day by day. These promptings are loving in intent, for the real good of either ourselves or others. Indeed St John wrote that all acts of love are divine. He said “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.” (I John 4:16b) St Paul described the characteristics of life in the Spirit with his famous list of the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians chapter five: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” (Gal. 5:22.)

So the first characteristic of the words of God to us through his Holy Spirit is that they are loving in intent. But be warned: the kind of love that characterizes God is the self-sacrificial love that a parent has for his or her child, a love called *agape* in Greek. While God does care for our well-being, he would like to use us in the service of others, very occasionally to the

point of death. Martin Luther King found that despite his peaceful, loving campaign, his efforts to achieve justice for the black community were often met with hatred and harm. He wrote [in Testament of Hope, p.41] of being put in jail five times, of his house being bombed twice, and of being the victim of a near-fatal stabbing.

So life in God's service is not always easy. But King would not be put off. Elsewhere he wrote [Strength to Love, p. 40] of his determination to continue loving white people no matter how dreadfully they treated him.. He concluded:

Be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer.

One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves.

We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win *you* in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.

As you know, on 4<sup>th</sup> April 1968 King was shot dead in Memphis.

It is to the credit of the United States nation that every year they honour King with a public holiday.

The first characteristic of God's Holy Spirit is that His words are loving in intent. A second characteristic is that they are very wise.

James, in his letter, refers to the promptings of the Spirit as "wisdom". Earlier in chapter one he writes: "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God...and it will be given to him." (James 1:5). In the first few chapters of the book of Proverbs, wisdom is the name given to God's Spirit. For example, there it is written:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding...

Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding...

She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her.

Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who embrace her; those who lay hold of her will be blessed.

Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her, and she will watch over you. Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. (Pr.3:5,13,17-18; 4:6-7)

The advice of the Holy Spirit is not only loving, it is also wise, sometimes wise beyond our understanding.

Finally, when we start to do what the Spirit suggests, we find that He also provides us with the strength we need to get the job done. Paul wrote to the Philippians: "I can do everything through him who gives me strength." (Philippians 4: 13)

So the Holy Spirit is a source of new spiritual life, He reveals the truth to us, He inspires us to act in ways that are loving and wise, and He provides the strength we need to obey Him.

Then how can we experience God's Holy Spirit for ourselves? In our passage, James writes that God has promised his life "to those who love him." (v.12) Let me stress that we cannot find the Holy Spirit by ourselves. He is a divine person, who must be addressed. We can ask Him to guide and strengthen us, but then we must wait for his inspiration. Jesus told Lazarus that the Holy Spirit is like the wind that "blows wherever it pleases." (John 3:8.) Not only must we invite the Holy Spirit to guide us, our motives for doing so must be good. We must sincerely want to love God by serving and obeying him.

The voice of God is quiet, and closer to us than our own thoughts. Do you remember how God addressed Elijah? Not in earthquake, wind or fire, but with a still small voice (I Kings 19: 11-12). We must still our minds and remain expectant to catch what God says.

Let me conclude with the words of Psalm 95:

Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker;

For he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.

Amen.

## **The Life of God**

### *Sermon summary*

James 1: 12-18

James wrote to Christian Jews who had dispersed around the Mediterranean to avoid persecution in Jerusalem.

He encouraged them to persevere in their faith, in order to receive "the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him."

What is a "crown of life"?

It is (1) a symbol of the life and glory that Christians will enjoy in heaven, possibly bestowed at Jesus' second coming. (I Cor.9:25; I Peter 5:4; Rev. 2:10.) And it is (2) the gift of God's Holy Spirit to those who love him.

The life of God is not available to those who live in sin.

Adam was excluded from the Garden of Eden, and from the Tree of Life.

We must avoid the seven deadly sins, and not let righteous indignation turn to hate.

Martin Luther King insisted on this.

While we obey our own desires, we remain deaf to the will of God.

What are the characteristics of the Holy Spirit?

(1) He is the particular word of God to each of us, here and now.

(2) His will is loving in intent. But the love is *agape*, self-sacrificial in nature.

It can incur the wrath of others, and consequent suffering, even death, as in the case of Martin Luther King.

(3) His will is very wise. Note the praise of Wisdom in Proverbs chs. 1-4.

(4) He provides us with the strength to do His will. (Philippians 4: 13.)

How can we experience the Holy Spirit?

We must sincerely want to serve God, and should ask God to send us His Spirit to guide and empower us.

We must be still, wait and listen for the Spirit's promptings: a still, small voice.

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. (Ps. 95)