

## Three Homilies on the Epistle of James

Sunday September 9, 2018 The 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost Proper 23B  
St John-the-Evangelist, Hamilton. The Rev'd Canon Brian Ruttan PhD.

James 2:1-10, (11-13), 14-17

2:1 My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? 2:2 For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, 2:3 and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," 2:4 have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

2:5 Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? 2:6 But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? 2:7 Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

2:8 You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." 2:9 But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 2:10 For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. 2:11 For the one who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. 2:12 So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. 2:13 For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment. 2:14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? 2:15 If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 2:16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? 2:17 So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

I came to Anglicanism at the Church of the Holy Trinity in downtown Toronto where, in 1968, we packed up the little red Prayer Books and in 1969, I started to lead music with guitar, singing folk hymns, Negro Spirituals and some newly compose hymns in those styles.

Holy Trinity, Toronto, before the Eaton Centre was built, was on the cross Toronto route for all sorts of indigent, homeless people, in those days mostly alcoholic men. We started to have a community lunch after the Sunday services and lots of the local homeless would join us. We got to know them a bit. Their stories were about losing everything for the sake of the bottle, some falling from remarkably high places. The point is they were welcome. It was a community lunch and they were welcome. We had to learn to be vigilant about purses and wallets!

My first assignment in 1982, as a newly ordained Deacon was Assistant

Curate in a traditional suburban congregation in St Catharines. My new parish, despite being traditional, ordinary and old fashioned, was a completely new experience for me. The Bishop, the Archdeacon, the Wardens had simply assumed that traditional Anglican practice was dyed in my wool. I had to learn quickly.

It was about this time of year soon after I started in my new parish. We were at coffee hour. A couple of strangers were there having coffee and cookies with us. They looked a bit rough but nowhere near as grubby as some of the downtown Toronto folks. I saw they were chatting with members of the congregation, when I realized, they were working the room asking for handouts. I actually found that amusing and enterprising silently wished them luck. The next thing I knew, a couple of the younger men in the congregation had escorted these guys out of the building.

Given my assumptions about Christian welcome and hospitality coming from my earlier experience, I was astonished at what had happened.

The next Sunday it was my turn to preach. I am not given to rebuke, but I have twice in my life delivered a sermon of rebuke: this was my first one. The action of ejecting our guests was a clear example of what James calls "favouritism" except worse because, in James example, the poor were not thrown out just told to stand out of the way or sit on the floor(2:3b). James continues: "Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? (2:5b). You have dishonoured the poor. James concludes,

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (2:14-17)

A similar point is made in the First Letter of John (2:3) where the writer maintains that those who say they love God but fail to love their neighbour are simply liars whose declaration of faith is false.

It is a rare gift to preach to people who have acted in a way that so blatantly contradicts Biblical wisdom. Just quoting the relevant Biblical passage is rebuke enough.

There is, however, a fundamental difficulty that arises from this particular passage in James; one that led no less a figure than Martin Luther to dismiss

it, calling it “an Epistle of straw”. The reason for that dismissal was that for Luther, St Paul’s Letter to the Romans was a theological touchstone. In fact, through the history of Christianity in the West, theological visionaries such as St Augustine, Luther and Karl Barth have drawn from Romans what they understood to be the essential teaching of our salvation in Jesus Christ: Salvation by faith alone. (Really it is salvation by grace alone but, since our faith is the result of grace, then by faith alone is a shorthand.)

For these theological giants, to discover or recover the key, salvation by faith alone, was like finding the pearl of great price. Eureka! The key to the truth! So then, what was left to say about the humble Letter of James and the 1<sup>st</sup> Letter of John who are emphatic: Faith without works is dead! And If you say you love God but hate your neighbour, you are a liar! Do we dismiss them as mistaken and irrelevant? Ignore them as if they don’t exist?

It would be a mistake to leave these Epistles out in the dark because they serve a very important theological function: they help us understand how faith takes shape. It would be quite wrong to understand them to be teaching that you can earn your salvation by being good people. What they are saying is that faith is more than an inner personal intellectual and emotional experience. It also takes concrete shape in what we do and how we live in our social world. Left bottled up inside us, our faith is dead. It has no shape, no presence in the world. To be deeply affected emotionally and intellectually by Jesus Christ and not join the church, not find any way to love our neighbours or serve the needs of others, is like having life itself vibrant locked within you and letting it wither and die in captivity. The great Roman Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, a contemporary of Karl Barth mentioned earlier, wrote that there is no theoretical way to love God. Loving our neighbour is not merely how we demonstrate that we love God, to love our neighbour *is* to love God.

*Brian Ruttan*

Sunday September 16, 2018, The 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 24 B  
St John-the-Evangelist, Hamilton. The Rev’d Canon Brian Ruttan PhD.

James 3:1-12

3:1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 3:2 For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. 3:3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. 3:4 Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds

to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 3:5 So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!

3:6 And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. 3:7 For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, 3:8 but no one can tame the tongue--a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 3:9 With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. 3:10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. 3:11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? 3:12 Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

We live in times in which "taming the tongue", that is care and restraint in what we say, is not very fashionable. Respect for others in what we say seems sometimes to have disappeared. Twitter seems to have eroded any care of speech that we once might have had. Many public figures seem now to resort to attacking the person rather than to argue reasonably against that person's position on a given issue. In classical philosophy and rhetoric, this was called "argumentum ad hominem" meaning "attacking the person". It was understood to be a foul play which carried no weight in an argument. Now it is commonplace and routinely degrades respect and civility.

The sins of the tongue in our times go way beyond fouls in debate. These days, public figures routinely lie blatantly in order to score political points and the journalists' reporting of the truth as best they can, gets labelled as "fake news". The irony has an acid drip.

In Proverbs 1, Wisdom cries out in the streets: "How long will scoffers delight in mudslinging, and fools hate knowledge?" Across the ages, She brings incisive and damning critique to our times.

According to the *Toronto Star*, the president of the United States has made 2,436 "false claims" from taking office until the end of August. (They use the term "false claims" because the term "lies" implies intention which they can't always verify.) His torrent of falsehood, and foul speech has included several dangerous diatribes. For instance, he has branded Mexican migrants as "murderers and rapist" when there was no evidence to support such a claim. He continually accuses, most American news media, of publishing "fake news" so they are the "enemy of the people". In addition to habitual lying, he routinely denigrates the basic human dignity of women; he is insulting to other foreign leaders including our own Prime Minister and he frequently bad mouths his own senior staff. Rationality, civility and respect in American

public life are in severe danger. Bob Woodward's new book *Fear* documents this descent inside the Administration.

The damage of what we say, of course, is not always so blatant. Even when our intentions are good, we can sometimes do injury to others. Death and funerals, for instance, cause us anxiety and what we say to convey condolences can sometimes cause deeper pain. I recall overhearing a man speaking to a grief stricken widow at a funeral home some years ago. In his anxiety to say the right thing, he had memorized a speech which he rhymed off to her and then hurriedly left. There was nothing ostensibly wrong with what he said but how he said it left her stunned and angry.

Not so bad, perhaps, as the unthinking comments made to many parents of a dead infant: "Don't worry, you can always have another", "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, blessed be the name of the Lord." True sayings, certainly, but, in the context, adding gratuitously to the bereaved parents' pain. There is no "right" thing to say, in response to death and loss, certainly no potted wisdom to convey, so we need to trust the wisdom of what we are feeling then and there.

We are moving here to more subtle and demanding levels of speech. We need to heed the wisdom of St Paul who, to the Ephesians, writes, "Speak truth in love" (4:15). My best understanding of this is that I speak to my own feelings while respecting the feelings of the other and, at the same time, remain truthful. A tall order, to be sure, but one to strive for in the wisdom and courage of Christ Jesus.

As an example, apropos of my story last Sunday about the two men being ejected from coffee hour: if I were to say, "Joe, you are such a jerk for throwing those poor guys out of the building last Sunday. What kind of Christian are you anyway?" I have made a personal attack on Joe which invites conflict. Joe could be excused for making a defensive response.

If, on the other hand, I were to say, "Joe, I felt really upset when I realized you had escorted those men from the building last Sunday, what happened?" Here, I am stating my feelings about what happened and inviting a response from Joe's feelings. The truth of what happened is made clear in both cases, but in the second, the possibility of coming to a mutual understanding is much more likely.

The Letter of James's final words on the subject are about the incongruity of tongues that praise God and, in another breath, curse or injure those who

are made in God's likeness. This should not be so, he writes, in utter simplicity.

Let me add this, may our tongues always be the instruments of Holy Wisdom. Let us speak from our hearts, deeply aware of our own feelings and, In one way or another, let Christ always be the centre of everything we say!

*Brian Ruttan*

Sunday September 23, 2018. The 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 25 B St John-the-Evangelist, Hamilton. The Rev'd Canon Brian Ruttan PhD.

James 3:13 - 4:3, 7-8a

3:13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. 3:14 But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. 3:15 Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. 3:16 For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. 3:17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. 3:18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

4:1 Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? 4:2 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. You do not have, because you do not ask. 4:3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

4:7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 4:8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

*The Good Life*, a popular jazz standard by Sacha Distal and Jack Reardon, from back when popular music sounded more like music, was recorded by Tony Bennet in 1963 and became a sort of theme song for him. The lyric contains a simple irony that what is supposed to be the good life, sophistication, success, style, turns out to be empty and hopeless.

The second half of chapter 3 and the beginning of chapter 4 of the Letter of James has a similar message: conventional worldly wisdom ends up sowing disorder and wickedness.

So our theme today is simple: the good life according to worldly wisdom fashionable, sophisticated, successful is ultimately empty, The good life based on wisdom from above is "pure,.. "peaceable, gentle, willing to yield,

full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.” (3:17) To live according to the wisdom from above is to embrace life in its fullness.

James begins this section by asking “Who is wise and understanding amongst you?” Here, the writer is echoing the Wisdom tradition in Hebrew thought. Compare James’s line to the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of Proverbs: “Does not Wisdom call and does not Understanding raise her voice?” The Letter of James is set firmly in the Wisdom tradition. Like large sections of Proverbs, The Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus, the Epistle of James is a collection of moral and practical advice about living a wise, prudent life.

[“Just a minute”, you might be saying under your breath, “The Wisdom of Solomon”, “Ecclesiasticus”, biblical books? I’ve never heard of them. Well, if you grew up Presbyterian or United Church or in another Reformed tradition church, the Bible you came to know does not include these books. If you grew up Anglican or Lutheran, you learned that these books and several others are contained in a third section of the Bible called *The Old Testament Apocrypha*. If you grew up Roman Catholic, you learned that they are contained in the Old Testament proper. The short reason for these differences is that the 16<sup>th</sup> Century French reformer Jean Calvin thought these late Wisdom books did not contribute to Christian doctrine, and so left them out of *The Geneva Bible* which became the standard Protestant Bible.]

These Wisdom books of the Old Testament Apocrypha personify Wisdom as a female figure integral to the being of God. She is instrumental in the design and order of Creation and she urges us constantly to live our lives in harmony with God’s intention particularly as it is reflected in God’s Law.

The letter of James is in this tradition but, instead of concentrating on the perfection of the Law, focuses on the fruit of good works that flows from faith in Jesus Christ: the good works that give shape to our faith. For James it is not possible to have faith in theory, it must be practised. It must bear fruit. “Faith without (good) works is dead” (2:26), he writes.

In this teaching, James is recalling what Jesus, himself, taught. He made his summary of the Law and prophets: Love God with all your heart, mind and soul and love your neighbour as yourself. (Matt 22:35-40; Mark 12:28-31; John 13:31-35; (Luke 10:25-28)) The second part, love your neighbour as yourself, is the good fruit of the first, Love God with your whole being. Jesus frequently illustrated this theme in his own teaching about bearing fruit (the

true vine John 15, the parable of the sower Matthew 7) and being productive (the parable of the talents Matthew 25:14), doing acts of kindness and generosity (the good Samaritan Luke 10: 25). When James refers to the wisdom that has come down from heaven, he is writing, of course, about Jesus's teaching.

There is a sort of unsophisticated straight ahead honesty in the Letter of James. In Chapter 5, he says, don't get complicated with oaths and contracts, let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no. ["Straighten up and fly right", as the 1943 Nat King Cole / Irving Mills song goes; itself based on a sermon story told by Cole's preacher father.] "Conflicts and disputes are the result of cravings and coveting things you can't have," James writes. The key is to reject any pleasure that might arise from earthly pursuits because, in your enjoyment you are being unfaithful to God. It's like committing adultery. So the writer turns psalm 30 upside down by writing "let your laughter be turned into mourning, and your joy into dejection" (4:9) It is better to be joyless and dejected than to take pleasure in the wrong things. This is pretty harsh, but we get the point: Worldly wisdom with all its sophistication and style is only going to cause conflict, misery and emptiness. The wisdom from above, on the other hand, leads to fulfilment, peace and being fully alive.

Jesus is fond of framing the conflict James is describing as paradoxes. We had one last week from Mark 8 "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." (8:35) and this week another paradoxical saying from Jesus, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." (Mark 9:35b). The force of these statements is this: like Jesus, we are called to a sort of voluntary slavery, that is, we put ourselves at the disposal of others. This is what James is getting at in his anti-sophisticated manner. It is very simple. To live the good life is to choose, for the sake of Jesus Christ and his wisdom from above, to devote oneself to a life of service for others.

*Brian Ruttan*