

Sermon by Rev David Thiem

30th August 2015 – Pentecost 14 – Wesley Uniting 9am & 10.30am

Theme: “Living as God’s People’

Readings: James 1:19-27

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15 & 21-23

Text: “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry...” James 1:19b

Introduction

This is the first Sunday in the month where we are particularly focussing on “Stewardship” and what that means for us personally as well as a congregation and as a parish. Part of stewardship is about money and giving but it is far more than that. It is about being good stewards of what God has given to us and how we then respond to God by the way we care for all that we have been entrusted with. Part of this means looking at the way we live, the way we act and how we interact with others and the basis to our responses within the community in which we live and have our being.

I was amazed with two of the set Lectionary readings for this Sunday which speak to us, in different ways, about living as people of faith. If I’d tried, I would have had difficulty picking better readings for today.

In the Gospel from Mark 7, selected verses, Jesus is challenged by a group of teachers and lawyers from Jerusalem as to why his disciples don’t follow strictly the traditional Jewish ritual cleansing customs before eating. Jesus turns this attack around and says that what comes ‘out of a person’ makes them ‘clean or unclean’ not the outward customs/traditions.

The Epistle of James teaches about hypocrisy and living a life based on the Word of God which leads to ‘pure and faultless’ acts that cares for others.

Both of these passages are male orientated, which reflects the time of writing.

However as we look at these passages today I’ll make them less sexist to more appropriately fit our societal norm.

Mark 7:1-8,14-15 & 21-23

Our reading from Mark assumes that the following Jesus was gaining was of concern to the religious rulers in Jerusalem and so they send a delegation to see first-hand what is occurring. Hence in verses 1-5 we have this background on what was expected ritually both to clean yourself and your cooking utensils before eating. This was all part of the traditions of the elders of the Jewish faith and was expected to be followed by all practising Jews. Jesus had already ‘fallen foul’ of the religious authorities for associating with the ‘unclean’ people noted as ‘sinners and tax collectors’ earlier in Mark 2:16.

Here we have another challenge to Jesus:

“Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with ‘unclean’ hands?” Mark 7:5b

Jesus, as usual, doesn’t directly answer the question but cuts through to the issue at hand, from his perspective, and initially quotes Isaiah 29:13 which is a ‘shot’ at the

religious rulers back in those olden days. “These people honour me with their lips but their hearts are far from me... their teachings are but rules taught by men.”

And then Jesus says directly to those criticizing his disciples:

“You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.” Mark 7:8

Basically Jesus is calling the religious group from Jerusalem a bunch of hypocrites who find ways around the Law to suit themselves. While not in the set verses for today Jesus goes on to say that the Corban, a gift devoted to God, has been wrongly used by the legalists as a way of getting around practically supporting their own parents – ‘Oh we had to give this or that to the Temple, therefore we can’t help support you.’ This is in Mark 7:9-13.

Then Jesus calls everyone to him, and his teaching here cuts across the traditional teaching on ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’.

“Nothing outside a person can make them ‘unclean’ by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that makes them ‘unclean’. Mark 7:15/16

Then at the end of this section Jesus states some of the ‘unclean’ things that come from within a person:

‘..evil thoughts, sexual immorality, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, envy, slander, arrogance, lewdnessthese come from inside and make a person ‘unclean’.
Mark 7:21b-23

It is not stated by Jesus specifically here, but is heavily implied, that as his followers we need to make sure that we avoid these ‘unclean’ areas which defile us in the sight of God and only allow the ‘clean’ areas of our lives to come forth from the heart. No doubt the delegation from Jerusalem would have returned talking of the blasphemy that Jesus was preaching, which ultimately led to his arrest, trial and execution. Jesus was a revolutionary, teaching against some of the customs of the day that had overtaken faithfulness to God and the true teaching of God’s Word. This leads into the passage from James.

James 1:19-27

This short letter is an encouragement to Jewish Christians in the early days of the church to live a vital life of faith characterised by good deeds and a faith that is lived out. Certainly the section in our reading for today encourages us to live a life appropriate to a person who has heard “the word of God” and truly lives out that way of living as one who has accepted Jesus as their Lord and Saviour.

By our thinking today we may struggle a little with the phrases:

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

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves.

Do what it says.” James 1:21b/22

Here James is saying to those early Christians, don’t simply hear the word of God, or listen to the word of God rather act on it. Take note and see what it is saying to you and then go and do what you are called to be doing. The ‘word of God’ is not passive, it is active and impinges on us internally and externally. That is, we are called to live out our faith positively.

The three essential elements of religion spelt out in this passage are encapsulated in verses 26/27:

- Bridling or keeping a check on your tongue – this is the ethics of speech and may also be taken today a step further to include what is said in emails/facebook etc
- Visiting orphans and widows, who are the representative categories of the poor in Jewish literature. Today we can take this to mean those on the edge of society, the powerless, the refugee, those who struggle for whatever reason with our community
- Keeping ourselves uncorrupted or from being polluted by the values of the world. This is difficult in our society with high expectations on performance, wealth accumulation, climbing the social/work/academic ladder and being known by what you do rather than who you are and what you believe.

Hence here we have the stewardship of our lives. How we interact with others and the personal and faith values that we live out because of our belief in Jesus as our Lord and Saviour – these are the important things in life which our Scriptures remind us of today.

For me, the challenge that I'm reminded of comes in James 1:19

“Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.”

What a different society and world we'd have if we took seriously the teachings in both these passages for today.

The practical living out of our faith and what we are called to live out is here given to us in very practical teaching.

Praise be to God, through Christ, for the Word given for this day.

May we ponder this Word for us and seek to be good stewards in the way we live our lives. Amen.