

Be Doers of the Word

Preached at Littlemore on 12th Sunday after Trinity (3rd September 2006)

James 1 v 17-27

Mark 7 1-8, 14, 15, 21-23.

I feel rather like some TV presenter saying “welcome back after the break”. When I last preached in July I talked about following Jesus’ command to rest awhile, recharge our spiritual batteries and become sheep rather than shepherds. Well, I have been away and done just that with my family. We have travelled to Switzerland, Austria and France visiting old friends and making new ones. The highlight was attending a service of nuptial blessing for an old friend of mine called Boris who was marrying an Austrian called Doris. It was a very colourful occasion; everyone was in national costume: the Austrian men were all in lederhosen and the English in Morning Dress. Unusually, the service included the baptism of their three children. Their oldest boy, Freddie, is Jacob’s age and was wearing a kilt, as was his father. I felt very sorry for Freddie’s godfather as he struggled to keep the boy’s kilt from flapping open as he held him upside down over the font.

But enough of that, I want to talk about two points made in today’s readings: How some things hold us back from God, and how some things help us get closer to him.

Firstly: how do things from within us keep us away from God?

As my family and I travelled across Europe, our journeys were blighted with every complication and hiccup you can imagine: taxis not turning up, traffic jams, going to wrong terminals, flight delays, getting split up by train doors closing and, of course, the terrorist alerts. Every time we embarked on another leg of our journey we asked ourselves, what is going to go wrong this time? It is when we feel helpless in these situations that our vulnerability can either become destructive and turn to fear, or make us rethink our priorities and relationships in a positive way. At such times of crisis and chaos, we are very likely to fall into temptation.

For example, our taxi driver did not turn up at 5.30 am on Sunday morning to take us to the Heathrow coach stop. I was so angry with him. I was frustrated and felt out of

control, and it made me realise how much I was relying on someone I did not know. Only after leaving an irate message on the answer-phone did I wonder whether some illness or personal tragedy had affected him. Perhaps he was not to blame. I still don't know, but I was too quick to curse and condemn him.

That was just one example of my being, as James puts it in this morning's epistle, too quick to speak and too quick to anger. Like a splinter in one's finger that irritates, distracts and then finally goes septic, this sort of anger is very destructive and spoils our relationship with God. We cease to be human, created in his image, but become corrupt and fallen, full of suffering. The ungodliness rises up from within to defile us.

In the passage we heard from Mark's Gospel, Jesus challenges the Pharisees, the crowds and even his disciples to understand where true godliness comes from. He contests the idea that the external observance of religious piety will in some way make a person more holy and acceptable to God. Jesus teaches that goodness or evil comes from a person's heart and that is where the change must begin.

James, Jesus' brother, addresses the same theme in this morning's epistle. He says, "If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless."

I find these words very challenging; here I am dressed up in clerical garb, well-versed in Anglican tradition and ritual, confidently preaching. Where is my humility? Where is the meekness that comes from the implanted word that has the power to save my soul?

This brings us to the second point: How can we get closer to God?

James tells us where to find him: in every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift that is from above. God, the Father of lights, gave his Son as that perfect gift to die on the Cross, and thereby gave us new birth by the word of truth, the Word incarnate. So it is here in the Eucharist that we celebrate and commemorate the truth of the Word made flesh, and receive him into our hearts. In response, we offer our souls and bodies to God as a living sacrifice.

As I intimated in my last piece for the *Window* before the holiday, re-evaluation of our spiritual life is sometimes easier when done away from the routine, repetitious comfort zone of our regular worship. Fresh insights come from joining in prayer and worship with Christians in new places.

We were away from home for a number of weeks, so I went to Mass in some interesting places: that magnificently kept Baroque village church in the Tyrol where Boris and Doris were married, and a very run down village church in Normandy. Both churches were very well attended. There were plenty of elderly men and women, but also many young families. Unlike England, it seems continental men between 20 and 40 do go to church with their families rather than read the newspapers and polish their cars.

I am not a very good German or French speaker, so the sermons were lost on me, but in both countries parts of the readings seemed familiar, and the liturgy, hymns and the prayers drew me in. I was able to hear and receive the word of truth in a fresh way. In this new situation I found myself quick to listen, and I met Jesus in those around me, who were doers of the word, as I was greeted warmly at the Peace, had pages in hymn books and missals pointed out to me, and I found my prayers and singing joined freely with those of strangers. Having received the word, and taken it to heart, these Christians lived the word also.

So both readings we heard this morning are exhortations for us to be Christians, not just to call ourselves Christians. We are told by James to be doers of the word, and not merely hearers. This phrase echoes that in the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus says: “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.”