

Sermon 23/09/18 (09.30) – James teaching and Phoebe Baptism

Prayer

Good morning! Well this is a bit scary – lot's of friends and family, and John has asked me to talk about Money and Power! Can't think why, but here goes anyway!

In today's world we have wonderful ways of inventing new expressions to describe situations and relationships – my personal favourite for describing personal relationships on Social Media is the simple phrase: "It's complicated"! That phrase was the one that kept coming back to me as I sat down to prepare this sermon – It's complicated!

It's complicated because of the number of layers and ideas in our texts this morning from James and Mark – layer upon layer of instruction and warning – more than 20 pages in the commentaries I used to unpack the meaning – how do I get that into a short sermon?

It's complicated too because of the "audience" today – not just the usual wonderful mix of brothers and sisters from St Michaels, but also young Phoebe coming for baptism, her family (some of whom are professionals at this preaching stuff), and her supporters who mostly know me as Sarah's slightly mad father who makes bad jokes and embarrasses his daughter!

Having said "it's complicated" however, there is one simplifying line that runs through these passages from James and Mark – the need to put God at the centre of our lives, to trust wholly in Him, and to put that into action in our lives. And that seems like a very good message for a baptism even if the subject for this Sunday is "Money and Power"!

So let's start by unpacking the passage from James as we have been for the past few weeks here in St Michaels. James letter is very much about putting our faith into action – about our deeds flowing from our heart attitudes, and today's passage follows that pattern. We have learned over the past few weeks a new formula here at St Michaels, $A+B=CD$ – attitude and behaviour make for Christian Discipleship.

It's important to remember this as we tackle these verses. It's easy to read them simply as a set of instructions or rules – "Do this, Don't do that"! However I think they are more a set of

warnings of things that we will do if our attitude, our relationship with God, isn't right. The message throughout James is "get your relationship with God", that is your faith, right, and then these behaviours, or works, will be the evidence of that faith.

When we are young, adults make simple rules to help us learn and develop attitudes – respect for each other – no bullying for example - and respect for the environment we are in etc – keep off the grass! As we grow more mature we begin to learn the reasons behind the rules. And the story of God's relationship with us follows much the same pattern. In the early books of the bible God gives his people detailed rules to obey so that they will grow to understand and reflect His relationship with them. When Jesus comes he takes us deeper – he treats us as adults and says "look behind the rules to who the Father is".

The heart of these passages today is that our attitude has to be one of putting God at the centre – letting God be God! Let's look at the various passages to see behind the direct instructions to the person of God beneath.

Our reading today from James is in three parts – some of you may want to follow it on page XXXX in the pew bibles. The three sections look at how we speak of our brothers in Christ, how we plan our lives, and how we regard our wealth. I will briefly unpack each area (there's enough for a full sermon in each!), and then we'll look briefly at the Gospel reading which also touches on wealth, before we draw some conclusions.

Do you ever grumble or grump? I certainly do!! In fact Liz occasionally smiles at me knowingly and says "Victor" – referring of course to Victor Meldrew! It's easy isn't it to make ourselves feel better by pointing out the failures in others, or in the situation. But James quickly points out the error in this! We are all equal before God, only He is greater or better! If I grumble about my neighbour, or start to say that God's ordering of events and the rules he has given aren't "fair", I am saying God got it wrong. Yet I am only here by his grace, by his act of love in creating me and this beautiful earth. To set myself up as judge of people or situations is to usurp God's authority and to disparage his grace. If I truly have the attitude that puts God first, so that I acknowledge with gratitude his bounteous generosity and grace to me, then speaking disparagingly of people or situations has no place – judgement is God's not ours to exercise!

OK, what about the second area? Are you a planner? Do you value being in control, with all eventualities covered? Surely preparation and planning are key skills to succeed in the world today? I'm a project manager by trade – this week I have been excited to see the results of weeks of planning coming to fruit as the west window has set off to be restored, hopefully retuning at the end of the year – is such planning contrary to God's will??

No, I don't think that's the message here. What James is saying is that we need to beware being presumptuous enough to think that because we have planned something it's going to happen that way! God orders the world and all that is in it – we need to acknowledge His sovereignty in all things. I think this is also a warning about a "Sunday only" faith – a belief that we have done the "God bit" on Sunday, leaving us free to get on in our own strength and will Monday to Saturday! Failure to honour God's lordship in every area of our lives is arrogance – once again setting ourselves in God's place! We need an attitude that recognises that the outcome of our lives is in God's hands – let us joyfully acknowledge his Lordship over us, born of his love and generosity and kindness!

And thirdly, bringing together the teaching from James and from Jesus himself in Mark's Gospel, we have the warnings about our attitudes to possessions and wealth. If James teaching on how we regard others, and how we rely on our own plans was hard, I personally find he is really ratcheting up the pressure when it comes to possessions! After all I am blessed with a nice home, a decent pension, and the best car in the car park - surely God is not asking me to give up all these is he?

James warns us about three aspects of our attitudes to possessions. The first is hoarding – simply storing up wealth for the sake of it – for the joy of seeing bigger and bigger numbers on the bank statement! As James points out, you are not going to take it with you! God provides so that we can be good stewards, and once again failure to do so is a sin against God as we fail to trust Him and his plans. Second is a warning against fraud – I'm sure most of us would look down on the scammers and like who seek to steal away our wealth, but are we so much better when we carefully "forget" things on our tax return? Acting fraudulently denies God's lordship and justice, once again saying we know better than God!

And finally James warns us against indulgence – using our wealth to satisfy our own lust for luxuries and pleasures! Today's world is full of temptations to buy ourselves happiness in

the form of things and experiences. We are encouraged to look beautiful, go on amazing holidays, fulfil our wildest dreams by whatever means – simply to put ourselves first because “you’re worth it!” Once again this is an offence to the father – he has already provided the one thing that will buy us the only thing that is truly “worth it” – the sacrifice of his own son so that we can enjoy eternity in relationship with the father himself! He has declared “you, each of you, and this morning especially little Phoebe, are worth it” – and has paid the price in full. If we hold that at the centre of our thoughts, then indulging ourselves will pale into insignificance!

Our gospel passage makes the same point. I’d love to unpack it in detail, but don’t have the time, so let me just highlight three things. The first is Jesus response to the rich young man: “Why do you call me good – no-one is good except God alone!” Jesus doesn’t claim “goodness” as his, but instead immediately points to the father – he acknowledges God’s sovereignty as the primary focus. Then, with love in his eyes and his voice, he challenged the core attitude in the young man’s heart – in this case his attitude to wealth, challenging him to turn away from it, literally to repent, as the necessary next step in his journey. And finally Jesus unpacks the meaning of what has just occurred pointing out just what a barrier wealth can be using the analogy of the camel and the eye of a needle. The point is not about riches, it is that only God can save us – our salvation is at God’s disposal, not ours!

So the message this morning is actually all about the gospel – recognising that our lives and our future lie wholly in God’s hands, and the key is that we have an attitude that acknowledges God at the centre of our lives, so we live trusting wholly in Him.

In many ways the act of infant baptism is an act which embodies all of this. In a few minutes we will collectively as the church, and as the family and supporters of Phoebe, make a series of declarations on her behalf acknowledging God’s sovereignty in her life, and trusting God to send his spirit to her to help her grow in relationship with him until such time as she is ready to make the promises herself.

Our role is one of discipleship. We are to teach her to speak well of all her brothers and sisters in Christ – to recognise that we are all fearfully and wonderfully made and are equally precious in God’s eyes – to avoid seeking to make ourselves appear better by making others appear worse – God is all seeing, we won’t fool him! We are to help her ride

the ups and downs of life, seeing always God's hand at work, and learning to trust him always to have love for his children high on his heart – and to avoid putting our trust in our own schemes and plans. And to have a right perspective on all that God has provided us with, most especially the wealth he has blessed us with living as we do in materially the richest 10% of the world. Our riches are not in gold and silver, or in wonderful pleasures of this life, but in our salvation and relationship with God, bought at his expense through the sacrifice of his son.

She will of course need to hear these messages from us as we help her grow, but she will learn far more by observation – by seeing the example of her family, her god parents and supporters, and us all as the family of the church. If we don't live with God at the centre, modelling the ways James has highlighted, avoiding thinking too highly of ourselves, our plans, or our resources, but instead fully acknowledging God's sovereignty in our lives then she will start to doubt the authenticity of our lives and our faith.

Fortunately God has promised us his holy spirit to counsel and guide not only her, but also us on the journey. Once again, God provides! So as we mull over these passages, and perhaps see the ways in which we are failing to live in the way we are called to, let us recognise our need to change our attitude, to repent, to amend our ways, to acknowledge God's amazing grace and provision, to ask again for the indwelling and guidance of his spirit – indeed let us each say the prayers of baptism not only for Phoebe, but for ourselves.

And remember, "If we don't live it, she won't get in!"