

**SERMON – 3/5/26****'Looking in the Mirror'**

James 1:19-27

“Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” (James 1:22)

Last week we began our study of the Letter of James by considering how the struggles we sometimes face as we try to live out our faith in Christ can actually turn out to deepen our faith and lead us on the way to Christian maturity.

This morning we are prompted to reflect on what happens when we open our Bible and read from the Scriptures or hear the Word of God read to us and preached on a Sunday here in Church. If you have been concentrating this morning you will have heard me make reference at the start of the service to the Parable of the Sower where Jesus uses the image of what happens to seed in different kinds of soils to explore what happens to the Word of God when it lands in our hearts, which are sometimes hard and unreceptive, sometimes distracted by other things but sometimes very open to what God is trying to do in us in growing and maturing our relationship with Him. You may also have noticed the references in the Psalm we read together earlier to the fruitfulness of delighting in the Law of the Lord and meditating on it day and night.

A Bible reading is sometimes announced with the words: 'Hear the Word of God' and often we pray at the end of a reading: 'God, bless to us this reading of your holy Word.' But what then? The seed is sown but the outcome is dependent on the type of soil it lands in together with the temperature and the rainfall to make it germinate.

A couple of weeks ago while we were on holiday, Christine and I spent a considerable amount of time and effort on preparing some soil to plant grass seed. Of course no sooner than we had planted it than we had a full week of blazing sunshine and no rain so we had to keep watering it. Almost every day since we have looked for signs of growth but to no avail and we thought all was lost, until yesterday when to our delight a bright green haze was

visible across the newly-seeded lawn and signs of wispy growth. Of course there is a long way to go but at least we know it wasn't a duff batch of seed and that our ministrations with the watering can had not been in vain.

Sometimes when I close my Bible after reading from it I realise that my thoughts have actually been elsewhere and although I have read the words I haven't fully taken the message on board. Sometimes when I go home for lunch on a Sunday I wonder what has happened as a result of my preaching – will the seed even germinate in the soil of people's hearts, will the enthusiastic comments of some after the service result in any action further down the line and most importantly of all will there be *any* fruit at all, never mind the 30, 60, 100 times what was sown in Jesus' parable?

Hear the Word of God... God, bless to us the reading of your Word... Then what? We'll come back to that thought in a moment but first let me mention in passing a couple of interesting sub-themes in the verses we read this morning, both of them contributing to the main theme of being doers of the Word as well as hearers of it.

James begins this morning's passage by urging us to be quick to listen, slow to speak and above all slow to become angry because what we sometimes describe as 'righteous indignation' doesn't necessarily produce the righteousness that God desires. In this season of political campaigning we are used to hearing passionate appeals to bring about this or that desirable outcome but the more jaded amongst us are hesitant to believe that much will significantly change. Instead, James says – and I think this is a verse that deserves some real pondering – “Humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save you.” (v.21) It's a recognition that real spiritual transformation comes about not so much by our own energy and activity but by allowing God to speak to us, and through that to act in us and through us in the world. Or in the terms Jesus uses in the parable of the sower to yield the good fruit that comes from good seed sown in good soil.

And James concludes this morning's passage by comparing those of us who may consider ourselves religious but don't keep a tight rein on our tongues with 'religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless' (v.26) namely 'the care of orphans and widows in their distress' and not allowing ourselves to be 'corrupted by the world's ways.' James is very much standing in the tradition of Old Testament prophets like Micah who said, 'What does the Lord require of you but to do what is right, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God' (Mic.6:8) or Isaiah who declared the Word of the Lord: 'Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe them.'" (Is.58:6-7) Hear the Word of God, James is saying – it's not good enough for you to say you are a Christian but not show that by living the way of love; it's not good enough to sing your heart out in church on Sunday if the rest of the week you are colluding in the ways of the world that cause suffering to the weak and the vulnerable.

Which takes us to this morning's text: "Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."

James offers us a really thought-provoking image to help us grasp the message here. I would venture to suggest that virtually all of us here this morning have looked in a mirror this morning. I was in front of a mirror when I was brushing my teeth although I can't say I was really concentrating on what was there before me. I did pay a but more attention when I was checking that I was presentable to come out to church but that was about the limit of it. I guess many of you will have spent rather longer than I did. But in reality once we have left the mirror behind what do we actually remember of what we have seen? We get on with what we are doing and trust that if something catastrophic has happened to our appearance someone will have the decency to tell us so that we can put it right.

Last week I took the story of the apostle Paul and his thorn in the flesh to illustrate what James was saying about God using our struggles and suffering to deepen our faith. This morning I would like to take a story from the Old Testament which you may well

have heard told (although it may be unfamiliar to some of you). It's a story from the life of King David just after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba and then sent her husband to the front line to a certain death before Uriah discovered that he was not the father of the baby his wife was carrying. The prophet Nathan takes King David aside and tells him a story about a poor man who has only one lamb and his rich neighbour who, instead of taking one of his own large flock to feed his visitors, steals the poor man's lamb and serves it up for dinner. Thinking he is being asked to make a judgement on the case, David is furious and rules that the rich man is guilty of a terrible crime and that he must pay his poor neighbour four lambs by way of recompense. Then Nathan utters four of the most devastating words in the whole Bible when he says to the King, 'You are that man.' (2 Sam.12:7) He says, "Why have you despised the Word of the Lord and done this horrible deed? For you have murdered Uriah the Hittite with the sword of the Ammonites and stolen his wife." (2 Sam.12:9)

David, the psalmist whose words we have all found helpful over the years and who undoubtedly had a close and personal relationship with the Lord, had been looking in the mirror but then immediately forgetting what he had seen there. He knew the Scriptures and he knew fine well that adultery is wrong but he has chosen to forget what he had seen in God's law on that matter. James urges us to treat the Scriptures as something much more than a mirror that we take a look at briefly only to get on with our lives unaffected by what we have seen. He writes: 'Whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom *and continues in it* – they will be blessed in what they do.' (v.25)

Hear the Word of God. God, bless to us the reading of your holy Word. Then what? What will actually happen to this morning's Bible reading and sermon after the service, I wonder? What will happen after you read from your Bible on your own? Indeed, how intently will you look into the perfect law that gives freedom when you read the Bible and to what extent will you allow the Word to be planted in you, to grow in you and be nurtured in your and bear fruit in your life?

Let me exhort you to let God's Word be the real mirror that allows you to see much, much deeper than skin deep; let God's Word be the seed that will find good soil in your heart and soul and will enable you to bear much fruit, enduring fruit for the Kingdom; and let God's Word bring out of you a religion (that is to say a way of life) that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless because it attunes with the life-transforming ways of the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ and brings blessing not only to you but to all those around you and most especially to those who are most vulnerable.

Hear the Word of God, my friends, and may God bless to each one of us the reading and the preaching of this most holy Word. "Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves (as David did). Do what it says."