

SERMON – 17/5/26**'Integrated Faith'**

James 2:14-26

'Someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds and I will show you my faith by what I do.' (James 2:18)

Sometimes a slogan really sticks in your memory. Endless TV adverts from my childhood still seem to be well and truly lodged in my tiny mind. I can still here the aliens proclaiming the wonders of reconstituted potato: 'For mash get Smash'; and then there was Molly Weir wiping down the bath and singing in her Glasgow tones: 'Flash cleans without scratching'.

Christian Aid have actually done a very good job over the years in memorable strap-lines. 'We believe in life before death' was one, but it's another one that came to mind as I read this morning's passage. It perhaps takes a wee moment to sink in – 'Faith Works'.

We continue our studies in the Letter of James this morning. So far we have considered 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, and we have reflected on what it means to be not only hearers of God's Word but doers of it also. Last week with Alex you were looking at how we live up to the great commandment, what James describes as the 'royal law' - to love our neighbour as ourselves, and this morning we come to what is one of the big themes of the letter, faith and action – 'Faith Works!'

As I mentioned when I gave an introduction to the Letter, it is sometimes suggested that the apostles James and Paul are at odds in what they say. In Galatians especially, Paul puts a strong emphasis on having faith – *trusting* God rather than *doing* things to win God's favour, and it is the big message of his Letter to the Romans that 'the righteous shall live by faith' – in other words that faith in Christ cannot just be an optional extra for good folk who feel inclined to bring God into their morality, because trusting in Jesus, Paul says, is the *only* way to be upright before

God. By contrast, James emphasises that we cannot just *listen* to the Word of God, we need to *do* what it says, and he teaches that faith cannot remain a private matter between the individual and God; it cannot remain purely *within* us, no matter how fully it occupies our thoughts; and it cannot remain a disembodied thing unrelated to daily life here and now.

On the face of it, Paul seems to suggest that all that is needed is for a person to have faith. 'Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved,' he says to the Philippian jailer. Paul does devote many pages of his letters highlighting the need to put our trust in Jesus rather than in our own abilities but it must also be said that all of his letters end with a sometimes lengthy exhortation about ways we should put our faith into practice in everyday life.

James, it would appear, is writing to folk who already believe – he is literally preaching to the converted. What they need to be prompted to is not greater knowledge or understanding of what God has done in Christ, but a greater awareness of how their faith should be worked out in the world. For both James and Paul it is not a question of faith *or* works, but a matter of faith *and* works.

Yes, our Christian discipleship must be founded on a living relationship with God in Christ; yes, it needs to be deepened through careful thought and study; yes, the Gospel is for sharing with others for the sake of their eternal soul. *But*, Christian faith must also issue forth in practical action.

In this morning's passage, James echoes last week's passage by giving a hypothetical example. "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, 'God, I wish you well; keep warm and well-fed' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?" (vv.15-16) Perhaps we might think that is an extreme example that would never happen in our church, but our brothers and sisters in Christ are not just those sitting around us here this morning or gathering in one of the other congregations. Fellow believers – our brothers and sisters in Christ – in too many places in this world are today lacking the food and clothing they need. How often do we close

our eyes to the needs of others, whether physical or emotional, or think that it is enough to celebrate the love of God or to commit to prayer or to give to charity now and then. As James says, "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." (v.17)

It's noticeable that both Paul and James also appeal to the example of Abraham's faith. The patriarch had been told that despite his and his wife Sarah's age and their childlessness, they would become parents to a great nation. Abraham had put his trust in God even though he couldn't see how it was going to happen, and as a result, God credited him with righteousness. As time went on, amazingly, Sarah gave birth to a son, Isaac. How they must have rejoiced, and how sorely Abraham's faith must have been tested when God asked him to offer his only son as a sacrifice. How could he become the father of a great nation if he put Isaac to death? Yet, he continued to trust God and God honoured his faith and his obedience, providing a ram to make the sacrifice with instead of Isaac.

James comments here: "You see that Abraham's faith and his actions were working together." (v.22) And that really ought to be *our* motto too as we build on the foundation of saving faith and demonstrate that faith by the way we act – as James goes on, "his faith was made complete by what he did." Surely that's the goal that all of us should be striving for as we seek to follow Jesus. Paul speaks about the different gifts that God gives each of us as members of the Body of Christ – some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, with this aim 'to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the Body of Christ may be built up until we all reach that unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fulness of Christ.' (Eph.4:11-13) He is suggesting that it is as we look *out* from ourselves and serve one another that our faith is strengthened and the church grows. By contrast, if we sit gazing at our corporate navel or if we hide ourselves away from the world and focus only on the deepening of our own faith, it is then that we receive the harshest condemnation. Jesus says to those who have done nothing: 'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the

will of my Father who is in heaven.' (Matthew 7:21) And James is similarly scathing: "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." (v.17) Faith and action *must* go together – thought and deed, prayer and effort.

We are called to live out our faith in the everyday world, a world in which too many go hungry or lack shelter or clothing, a world in which people abuse one another in all kinds of unspeakable ways, a world in which people are sad and lonely and frightened. We cannot gather here as a church week by week and go home again untouched. We cannot read our Bibles and carry on living the way we were. We cannot merely think about our faith or talk about it or attempt to share it with those around us without taking up the challenges that face us as individuals and as a church, in our community and in our nation and in the wider world. We cannot celebrate the sacraments and then press on unchanged by the fact that Christ has given up His life for us.

'Faith Works!' Well, it can do if we will let God work in us and through us. We need to be co-workers with God and with one another in providing practical help alongside our proclamation of the Good News of Jesus stepping into our world. Not all of us are called to go to work in the situations of need across the globe that we see on our television screens, but *some* are (and maybe you are one of them); we can all give financially according to the measure we have received; we can support the work of the Kingdom as we lift it prayerfully before the throne of grace; we can lift our voices and write letters to campaign for change in the structures of our society and of the wider world, shaming our leaders into committing a decent level of aid to the world's poorest people rather than cutting taxes for those of us who have plenty.

Some of us are called to answer God's call right where we are with those among whom we live and move and have our being. There are folk in need of all different kinds right here in our own community. As individuals and together as a church we need to let our faith in Christ be more and more active and demonstrative not so that people will speak well of *us* but so that (as Jesus Himself said) the world may see our good deeds and glorify our Father in heaven. As James says here: 'Abraham's faith and his

actions were working together and his faith was made complete by what he did.' May that be said of us also. Faith Works!