

Text: James 4:11-5:9

Sunday 1st March 2020

Brightons Parish Church

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

In 2019, we welcomed 13 people into membership here as part of Brightons Parish Church. We are unique in these numbers compared to our sister churches across the Braes area, for only one other congregation welcomed any new members, and that congregation only welcomed 1 all year. It's my hope that in a few weeks' time we may see another person come into membership here and I know of at least one other young mum who wants to explore membership with us by attending the "Open Door" course in the summer term, and so if anyone else would be interested in finding out about membership, then please do come and speak with me.

When someone comes into membership, I discuss with them the foundations of our faith, and when we formally welcome them during the service, we collectively affirm the Christian faith. Often we do this by saying together the Apostles Creed, which summarises the core beliefs we are taught in the Scriptures. **The creed reads:**

**I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.**

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.

**He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit
and born of the virgin Mary.**

He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again.

**He ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of the Father...**

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy universal Church,
the communion of the saints,
the forgiveness of sins,

**the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.**

**Hopefully we're familiar with these words and beliefs,
and to stray from any of this is to stray from Christianity.
But did you notice that there's a line missing? **It reads:** 'He
[Jesus] will come again to judge the living and the dead.'**

**Of all the lines in that creed, I suspect this is the one which
raises within us the greatest concerns and questions. We
like the idea of the forgiveness of sins and resurrection of
the body; we like the idea of a Saviour and a Father that
loves us. But the idea of there being a Judge and of all
people being judged, well that's an idea we'd rather not
think about too often; we'd rather skip those passages,
like in James today, which speak of God being the sole
Judge...**

After all, isn't this idea just antiquated, relevant for a darker age? And anyway, what gives God the right to stand in judgment of us at all?

It's fitting that we consider such matters on the very day that we celebrate Communion. I would like to read you a short fictional story, which engages with some of these issues. I'm not sure of the original author but I remember reading this in a Christian book at some stage in my early faith journey and being very moved by it. **So, let us imagine the scene...**

At the end of time, billions of people were standing on a great plain before God's throne. Most shrank back...

from the brilliant light before them. But some groups near the front talked heatedly, not cringing with shame - but with belligerence.

"Can God judge us? How can He know about suffering?", snapped a young woman. She ripped open a sleeve to reveal a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration camp. "We endured terror...beatings...torture...death!"

In another group a Negro boy lowered his collar. "What about this?" he demanded, showing an ugly rope burn. "Lynched, for no crime but being black!"

Far out across the plain were hundreds of such people. Each had a complaint against God for the evil and suffering He had permitted in His world.

How lucky God was to live in Heaven, they said, where all was sweetness and light. Where there was no weeping or fear, no hunger or hatred. What did God know of all that man had been forced to endure in this world? For God leads a pretty sheltered life, they said.

So, each of these groups sent forth their leader, chosen because they had suffered the most. A Jew, a negro, a person from Hiroshima, other individuals horribly deformed by ill health. In the centre of the vast plain, they consulted with each other. At last they were ready to present their case. It was rather clever.

Before God could be qualified to be their judge, He must endure what they had endured. Their decision was that God should be sentenced to live on earth as a man.

Let that man be born a Jew, to know the meaning of unjust discrimination. And let him be born into a poor family, in suspicious circumstances, so that the world sniggers behind his back about who his real father is.

Give him an almost impossible job - a task so difficult that even his family will think he is out of his mind when he tries to do it. A task that turns the authorities of the country against him so that they seek his life and hunt him down.

Let him live as a wanderer with no real income and no real way to make money. Let him live off the charity of others.

Let him be betrayed by one of his closest friends and brought with false charges before a cowardly judge. Let him be tried by a prejudiced jury, convicted on false evidence, and sentenced to death...

by the cruellest means of punishment devised by man.

But first let him be tortured, while all his friends desert him, and no-one puts out a hand to save him. Let even his father turn his back on him and disown him. Then he will know what it is to be truly alone.

Only then let him die. Publicly. Stripped, beaten, and in full view of a hostile crowd. A long, slow, agonizing death that spares him none of the pain that misused men and women have suffered at the hands of tyrants and oppressors through countless centuries. May he taste the full depth of it.

As each leader announced their portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval went up from the throng of people assembled.

As the last word was spoken, a hush fell upon the crowd. Across all this vast multitude there was not a sound. A silence fell, so deep it seemed as if the entire universe was holding its breath...For at that moment, all realised...that God had already served his sentence.

In the person of Jesus, the Lamb that was slain, the Holy One who was crucified, God served His sentence. But not because He had done anything wrong, rather He came to give His life that we may know eternal life; He came that the evil of the world would not go unpunished, and the suffering of this world would not go unnoticed or unending. Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, showed on the cross the holiness, the justice, the righteousness of God.

James speaks of these matters in the beginning of chapter five, highlighting the abysmal treatment of the poor by the rich, such that the injustice shown by the rich likely lead to the death of the poor, and as such James can say that their selfishness was a form of condemnation and murder of innocent people.

To both parties, rich and poor, the judgement of God brings a message. Wrongs will be righted. Evil will be punished. The cries of the poor have been heard. As such, **James exhorts us:** ‘Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming...be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near. Don’t grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!’ (James 5:7-9)

Knowing Jesus will return and that when He does He will judge the world, ushering in God's Kingdom, well that's supposed to help us persevere, to wait patiently, and in our waiting show grace to one another.

Friends, God is Judge, He alone is qualified to be Judge, and in His righteousness, He will set the world right, evil will be punished, suffering does not go unrecognised. The idea of God as Judge is not some antiquated idea, but a truth as relevant now, as for any time. Thank God He is our righteous, holy Judge!

Based on this view of God, we might be a little more open to that line from the creed: 'He [Jesus] will come again to judge the living and the dead.' It almost sounds like good news now – evil punished, wrongs righted, suffering

recognised and eradicated for the glorious new heaven and new earth will be ushered in upon the return of Jesus as Judge.

But the first part of our reading from James issues another reminder – we are temporal, like a mist that is here one day and gone tomorrow. As such, God alone is the one Lawgiver and Judge, and so we should humble ourselves under His authority, we should submit to His Word, the teaching contained in the Bible.

In verses 11-12, James raises the idea that to speak ill of another is to speak against the law, God's word. For in the Scriptures God forbids speaking in slanderous ways and to do so then is to break the law or speak against it, and when we break the law, when we speak against it,...

we are in effect judging the law, we are saying this bit of God's law ought to be obeyed and this other bit can be ignored, rather than allowing the whole of God's law to shape us.

The central issue is: will we humble ourselves under God's Word? Will we see that He alone has ultimate authority, He alone is Lawgiver and Judge?

James wants us to have a right understanding of God and of ourselves, and in that place of humility, find freedom, because when we appreciate something of the glory of God, including His rightful place as Judge of us all, then we can then more fully heed the words of Jesus, **who said: 'Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way as you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.' (Mt. 7:1-2)**

So, once again, thank God He is our righteous, holy Judge! He will come again and set the world aright, and that can give us perseverance. But knowing He will come again as Judge, upon our own lives, means we are free to stop judging, it means we are free to live in humility.

Yet, we need not fear God as Judge, because knowing Him as Judge is simply meant to cultivate perseverance and humility, not fear, because as Paul reminds us: ‘there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus’ (Romans 8:1). He reaches this affirmation because of what he understands God has done through Jesus. Earlier he wrote: ‘For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed his life, shedding his blood...God did this to demonstrate his righteousness, for he himself is fair

and just, and he makes sinners right in his sight when they believe in Jesus.'

(Romans 3:25-26, New Living Translation)

Friends, God our Judge has made a way for us to be forgiven, a way for us to be set free from condemnation and come into right relationship with Himself: all we need to do is trust in the death and resurrection of Jesus. And in that moment of humility, in that split second of decision, all fear of judgment goes, all fear of God being Judge goes, for we appreciate that it was because of His love He sent Jesus, because of His love He calls us to humble ourselves, and when we appreciate His love, all fear goes.

Brothers and sisters, on this day when we remember, when we celebrate and make known the death of Jesus through bread and wine, we affirm these truths – that, in righteousness, God will judge sin and He must, His holiness will not allow Him to overlook the slightest blot or stain.

But equally, equally, in love, God paid the price of our sin, He wants all of us to be forgiven, all of us to be in right relationship with Himself, and so He gave His life for us.

All that remains, is for you and I to humble ourselves, to come near to God, asking for His forgiveness, and trusting in His great promise to do so.

I pray we all will come before Him with such humility, knowing then that we are welcomed into His family and welcomed to the table which reminds us that God is Judge and God is love.

May it be so. Amen.