

**Text: James 5v10-20**

**Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> 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.**

**Parenthood is a funny thing. My daughter Hope's favourite TV programme is Peter Rabbit, and there's only so much of that which any sane adult can watch, so I thought this past week that I might expand her horizons and put on a kids Bible TV programme, which I found on Amazon Prime. Hope has watched a few episodes now and is thankfully asking for it not just Peter Rabbit, so at least there's a bit variety! I guess there's a bit of me that also thought a Bible programme might be a little educational as it might help her learn more about God, so after each episode I've tried to chat with her about the content, to see what she has gleaned.**

**But I guess I keep forgetting that Hope is only three years old and so she misses things or doesn't understand much of what is said – instead she often focuses upon something else completely or some little detail that isn't really part of the lesson being taught.**

**That experience with Hope, this past week, has reminded me that when we are young we can easily miss the deeper things. It is as we mature that we begin to understand things on a deeper level, whether it be a TV programme, or a story or even what is being taught about God in church. It's with maturity that we begin to have the ability to see beyond the surface of things and see past the distracting things.**

**So, what does this look like in the spiritual side of life? What does it mean to be spiritually mature? There could be several answers to that question but in relation to our passage today, and the letter of James as a whole, I think John chapter 5, has something for us to be mindful of in relation to spiritual maturity: ‘Jesus [said]: ‘Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.’” (John 5:19)**

**It’s a startling and somewhat bewildering line from Jesus – after all, He is God in the flesh, so what does He mean? Likely, there are multiple ways of correctly understanding these words from Jesus, and one such idea is this: that the Father defined Jesus’ reality. The Father’s works,...**

the Father's purposes, the Father's very existence defined and guided Jesus' life and ministry. **It was the love of the Father who said, 'This is my son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased' (Mark 3:17) – it was such love that saw Jesus through the temptations. It was the purpose of the Father that allowed Jesus to say in the Garden of Gethsemane, 'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.'** (Luke 22:42)

The Father defined Jesus' reality. Jesus lived in such close relationship with the Father that **He could say: '...[the Son] can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.'**

Now, let's remember that Jesus is our example, He is our teacher, our Lord, so He is the one we model ourselves upon, we should seek to become more like Jesus...

**So, if Jesus allows His life to be defined by the Father, if it is the Father who defines reality for Jesus, then that should be the case for us as well. This means that spiritual maturity is equal to the degree that we allow Father God to define our lives; defining how we see the world, how we respond to issues, and what choices we make. Spiritual maturity is the degree to which God defines our reality.**

**And it's this idea of spiritual maturity that seems to underpin the letter of James as a whole. James began his letter this way: 'James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ...' (James 1:1) For James, his whole life is wrapped up with Jesus; it is God who defines his identity and what James is about.**

Then later in the letter, **he writes**: ‘My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favouritism.’ (James 2:1) Here he wants them to understand who they are in Christ and live that out. Again, James sees spiritual maturity as the degree to which God defines our lives: defining our choices, our priorities, the things we give our time to, defining how we understand ourselves and understand the world.

Again and again, James has to take them back to this core understanding, because it’s all too easy to make God abstract and distant; it’s all too easy to forget God, as easy as forgetting the air we breath - we forget His priorities, we forget His ways, and when we do that we focus on the wrongs things or see things the wrong way.

**It's like with Hope** – because of her immaturity she focuses on the thing which gets her attention, rather than what the programme is trying to tell her about God. Likewise, spiritual maturity is the degree to which God defines our reality so that we are aware of Him and partner with Him, focusing on what truly matters.

One way of gauging this is to ask ourselves: do I really believe the Scriptures? Do I really believe this stuff about Jesus? Am I confident about the Christian faith? If you're not, **then one idea** be might for you to come along to the *Breathing In* event this Saturday. You can sign up today on the sheets at either door. The focus of input at the event is how we can be confident in our faith, and coming along to that event might give us some ideas. So, sign up!

**But coming back to James**, throughout this letter he has been taking this principle, modelled by Jesus, taught by the Scriptures, that part of spiritual maturity is the degree to which God defines our reality. This maturity is not dependent on age, it is not dependent on how long you've been a church member or even the length of time as a Christian, and to finish off his letter, James now gives a final flurry of input on what this would look like in practice. He touches on suffering, on honouring God, on prayer and on sin, and we'll briefly look at each of these, though they all could do with a sermon each.

**So, first off, patience in suffering** and James exhorts us to this, referencing the prophets and Job as examples. He draws on these personal, often difficult, stories because they all showed patience and perseverance because God defined their reality.

**The prophets knew they were called by God, often with a difficult message, and so even when hard times came and opposition rose against them, they persevered in their task; God defined their reality.**

**The story of Job is a bit different, it's about personal suffering, about suffering when we don't know why, and not because of our choices or the task God has called us to. What we see in the account of Job is a man whose life is defined by the reality of God and when tragedy strikes his picture of God is shaken, he's faced with questions he never asked before. On the surface, it can look like Job's faith withers and dies, but in actual fact, his complaint to God was a complaint born out of faith – God defined his reality and to that God he called out...**

**Job never gets the answers that he wishes for, but he reaches a place where he can still hold on to faith. God is still defining his reality at the end of Job's story.**

**James raises the issue of suffering because he is well aware that life, including for the Christian, is one in which we experience trouble – and in such a way that we may feel tempted to call into question the goodness of God. James is asking, even in the midst of suffering, will we allow God to define reality? Will we hold on to Him and what the Scriptures teach of Him? Or will we allow the difficult times to drive a wedge between us and God? Will we allow the whispers of the enemy to sow lies about God into our hearts and minds, such that we push God away to the periphery of our lives? James wants us to be mature, such that God defines reality even in the midst of suffering.**

**James then, in verse 12,** seems to shift topic abruptly once more. But as we've seen, speech is very important to James, because our speech reveals what we hold in our hearts, including about the reality of God. James here may be referencing rash or unrealistic vows that were most likely going to be broken and so to make an oath with God's name would be to involve God in falsehood, and as such it would discredit rather than honour the person of God, because a name was symbolic of the person.

I suspect that few of us are making any vows, particularly involving God or heaven, so what relevance is this verse for us today? Well, how about that underlying principle, that if God is defining our reality, then we should seek to honour the person and name of God in all we do. The application of this principle is so very broad, but...

**for a moment, let us stick with speech. Are any of us ever using God's name in vain? Are we using O.M.G. even accidentally? Or, let's remember that the Scriptures forbid any swearing or course language – are such words heard from our tongues? Because if God is truly defining our reality and we are taking onboard what He says in the Scriptures, then we are not honouring the person of God when we take His name in vain or when we swear. We are choosing at those times to use language that dishonours Him, because He has said not to do so.**

**We could take examples beyond speech: do we get drunk? Do we dishonour God by not honouring Him enough to have devotional time in the Bible and in prayer during our week? If God defines our reality, it is seen in how we honour the person of God, both in speech and in action.**

**The third and largest issue** in this final portion of the letter is with regard to prayer, and prayer in all circumstances. I wonder if any of our elders got a bit twitchy as we read through these verses because obviously elders are meant to have a particular task based upon the words of James. But we'll come to that in a moment as we work through these verses line by line.

**Verse 13 read:** 'Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise.' (James 5:13) This verse is directed to anyone, to everyone – we are meant to be a people of prayer, and prayer in all the circumstances of life, the bad times but also the good. Because if God defines our reality then when times are hard we turn to Him, and when we are thankful for something, we are quick to give Him the honour,...

because as James **reminded us earlier**: ‘Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights...’ (James 1:17)

In my preparation this week, I came across a really striking line **from one commentator**: ‘We should view prayer as [a] revolutionary tactic, not a passive resignation to a situation. In prayer, we enlist the aid and ear of “the Lord of Hosts” [“the Lord Almighty”] (if we recall James 5:4)...’ (Craig Blomberg, *James*)

What is your view of prayer? Is it like this? Or, do you see it as something ineffectual? Do you see it as simply speaking to the four walls, or only a moment of quiet inner reflection? Because James, along with the rest of Scripture, calls us to understand God as revealed...

**in His Word, and His Word reveals Him to be the Lord of Hosts, the Lord of Heaven's Armies, the Lord Almighty. To engage in prayer, is not passive resignation, but approaching the throne of Almighty God.**

**So, are we allowing God to define our reality such that we approach Him in prayer? Are we a praying people? Now, if you would like to grow in your prayer life, then why not come along to one of our many opportunities for prayer: Thursday evening or Sunday morning prayer times; the monthly evening service which has a focus on prayer; or join a Fellowship Group where you can pray for one another and hopefully the life of the church as well; or for elders and deacons, come along to the prayer times before our monthly meetings. We should all be praying and in all circumstances.**

**James then raises the issue of praying** for those who are ill. He says such persons should call the elders and they will come to ‘...pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord.’ (James 5:14)

The anointing of oil is symbolic in the Scriptures of a person being set apart for God’s special attention and care, as well as a symbol of God’s presence with that individual.

Should we always pray with anointing? Not necessarily – the overall teaching in the New Testament does not consistently pair healing prayer with anointing, and so we should not see this one verse as mandating oil to accompany all prayers for the sick. A number of commentators **highlight that the words...**

**'...the Lord will raise them up' (James 5:15) could signify people who are lying down, restricted to bed because they are so ill, maybe with a chronic or life-threatening illness.**

**And that matches reality, does it not, because a number of us here do have stories about God healing where no oil was involved. Just last year, one of our congregation members shared with me after the service that they had considerable pain in their shoulder, so I offered to pray with them. I laid a hand on their shoulder and prayed quite simply and succinctly.**

**At the time I wasn't really aware that anything had happened, because I forgot to ask what I would usually ask, "has there been any change?" ...**

**So, it wasn't until some months later, when I was speaking with this individual at the Alpha Course that they shared with me of the warmth they felt, not just of my hand but in a much stronger manner, a warmth working through their shoulder and of their shoulder then becoming better.**

**Now, I can also share the other end of the spectrum, because in this past year I have also prayed for another individual's shoulder and nothing seemed to happen on that occasion. But too often, too often, we let the negative define reality – and so somehow, we need to need to find a balance within our prayers: of never expecting God to heal and on the flip side, requiring God to heal on demand, rather than remembering He chooses how and when He heals....**

**Because complete healing never occurs in this life; any healing is only temporary, our bodies will fail us, and it is only in the new heaven and new earth that we will have a fully perfect body.**

**But still, will we allow God to define reality? He is the God who says that He heals, and that all healing – natural, supernatural, medical, physical, psychological or spiritual – is of His hand.**

**Now, I'm not saying we implement this straight away – healing prayer is something we grow into, but we should grow into it with intentionality, rather than putting it off or giving excuses.**

**One idea might be for you** to go through the Alpha Course after the summer break, where one of the weeks is on healing and it is an excellent week in particular. But equally, I am willing to pray for healing and pray with the anointing of oil - all you have to do is ask.

Often we do not think we can pray such a prayer, probably because we do not feel up to the task. **But as the passage reminds** us, it is 'in the name of the Lord' (James 5:14) that healing comes, it is not upon our own merit or the eloquence of our words which achieve such an outcome. As such, **James reminds us that** 'the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective...' (James 5:16) and then he goes on to speak of Elijah, **who James says** was '...a human being, even as we are.' (James 5:17)

**Elijah was that Old Testament prophet who could rise to the heights of faith, and then fall into the depths of despair. He could be brave and resolute sometimes, and then fly for his life at the whiff of danger. He was an ordinary person, but what set him apart for James, is that Elijah was right with God.**

**Elijah was in right relationship with God, he was a righteous person, because of his faith. For us, we come into a right relationship with God by putting our faith in Jesus, it is by Him we are made righteous. And so, if you have done that, if you are in right standing with God then James says your prayer is powerful and effective, because your prayer is coming before the throne of God in the name of Jesus, because You are in Jesus, Jesus is in You, and through Jesus you stand rightly before Almighty God.**

**So, let's not make excuses**, that we can't pray or that our prayers aren't good enough. Instead let us allow the reality of what God has done for us in Jesus to define our lives, because if we do we will then be a praying people, praying in all the circumstances of life, both the bad and the good.

**The final example of spiritual maturity that James highlights** is the peril of sin. James actually mentions sin in verses 15 to 16, with regard to prayer and healing, and the reference there is not suggesting all illness is related to sin, because Jesus debunked that theory Himself.

Instead, in verse 15, there is that simple assurance that any known sin can be forgiven and then in verse 16...

**the encouragement to own up to our faults and failings by practicing vulnerability with one another. By engaging in vulnerability through confession and prayer, James again seeks to help us live in the reality of God.**

**In my own life, I have a friend that I meet up with once a month, and we'll not only talk about how things are going, we'll also ask the hard questions: how's your walk with God, how's your purity? I also know I can message him if I'm struggling with something and often reaching out to him, being vulnerable, is enough to break the power of temptation and enable me to keep living in the reality of God by honouring God with my choices.**

**James also points out the peril of sin in the final two verses, where a person is wandering away from the truth.**

**Now, truth for James is more than just right beliefs, it also includes right practice, because as he's shown again and again, the truths of the faith should impact our living. So, to wander here could include both wrong belief and wrong practice and for such individuals, James exhorts us to get alongside them, to enter that place of vulnerability and seek to draw them away from the peril of sin.**

**Friends, I think the letter of James** has brought a timely message for us, for along the way his writing has given us principles, ideas and concrete actions to take onboard both individually and collectively so that we might have a faith which is more than mere words.

**Key to this is the degree to which we model ourselves upon Jesus, particularly the degree to which...**

**we live in the reality of God, and perceive the deeper things of God. This will be seen in the type of wisdom we exercise, in the way we treat one another and speak to one another, it will be seen in both our actions and in our prayers.**

**My prayer is that this timely word from God might help us all to mature in faith and in character.**

**To God be the glory, now and forever, amen.**