

TUESDAY COMMUNION

Hymn:

Reading: James 2.18-26

Prayers:

One of the great Christian questions is about what we have to do in order for God to accept us as those who can be with him.

The great religions recognise that the God who is at the heart of life is wise and good. They also recognise that we human beings are neither wise nor good, fallible in our understanding and, even at our best, far from perfect.

Both St. Paul and St. James wrestled with this question about our relationship with God, as did the German monk, Martin Luther, fifteen hundred years later. When Martin Luther described the Book of James as “that book of straw” he was thinking about the passage we’ve just read.

Luther’s great hero was St. Paul and for him the words of St. Paul about faith became central to his understanding of our Christian relationship with God.

St. Paul reminds his readers of how in the Book of Genesis God accepts Abraham as a righteous man because Abraham puts his trust in God.

The point Paul wants to make is this:

- God accepts Abraham and us
- and puts us in a right relationship with himself
- not because of what we have done, (not because of what James calls our “works”)
- but because of our faith, our confidence in God.

James uses the story of Abraham a different point. He remembers how Abraham obeyed God when he took his much loved only son and bound him in preparation to sacrifice him.

James makes the point that Abraham’s faith is seen to be genuine only because of his works, only because of what he was willing to destroy the child in whom all his hopes for the future were grounded.....

Luther felt that James was saying that faith alone is not the basis for our relationship with God. We have to prove to God that we are good enough by doing the right things! Out of his own experience and what he felt the Bible was saying he felt that James had “lost the plot”!

Let me declare an interest.

Martin Luther is one of my great heroes.

When he was a monk he tried desperately hard to be good enough to earn God’s love and acceptance. Try hard as he could, and he did try very hard, he was always aware that through ignorance or weakness that he was never that wise and loving man, that he believed God wanted him to be.

What he discovered through his reading of the Bible, and especially the letters of Paul, is that God accepts us as we are, warts and all.

“Faith” is the opening of ourselves to this love, the love which accepts us as the righteous people we will become through the work of Christ in our lives.....

For me, this is a true and precious insight.

But I think Luther was wrong to suggest that James is making the opposite point. Isn't James saying that if one has true “faith”, if one is really open to the God we meet in Jesus, then one should expect to see that person's life being shaped by the Spirit of God.

He's not saying that faith is unimportant.

He is saying that true faith always reveals itself in the quality of a person's life!

Surely Paul makes the same point:

***“I may have faith strong enough to move mountains;
but if I have no love, I am nothing.
Love is patient, love is kind and envies no one...
Love keeps no score of wrongs;
does not gloat over other men's sins,
but delights in the truth.....”***

James isn't saying that faith doesn't matter. He is saying to his own generation and to us that Christian faith, if it is real faith, is seen in the effect it has on the quality of a person's life.

True faith changes lives and enables God to begin here and now the process by which, beyond this age, we will be full of truth and love.