

Sunday 24
13/9/2015

Mark the Evangelist

James 2:1-13
Psalm 19
Mark 8:27-38

Be merciful, as God is merciful

James asks: “Do you really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, if you show partiality in your treatment of people, on the basis of their wealth and status?” Clearly he thinks not – as would most of us. But it is important to understand why.

The typical “religious” reason is that, since all religion is “really” about the Golden Rule, we must love one another as ourselves in order to be “religious”. Showing partiality on account of something as trivial as wealth is clearly not the type of thing most of us would enjoy if it happened to us. We cannot, then, be truly religious if we discriminate in this way, and so we clearly cannot believe in Jesus if we show such this kind of partiality.

The *religious* logic is clear, or the moral logic, if religion is reduced in this way to mere morality. And this would be fine for understanding James here if his logic *were* merely religious or moral, but it in fact it isn't. James is thinking out of what he believes God has done in Jesus, and not out of general religious ideas. The link he draws is between good works and believing *in Jesus* (and not between good works and believing *per se*). Why should *faith in Christ* make a difference to how we behave, rather than any other moral motivation we might have?

We see James' Christian logic becoming clearer when he starts to talk about judgement: to discriminate on the basis of something like wealth, he says, is “to become judges with evil thoughts”. The emphasis falls here on the word “judges”. The problem is not the failure to love or serve, but that this arises from the willingness to judge – the willingness to evaluate another person's *worth*. (This is different from the way in which we sometimes have to judge another person's *actions*, whether in our legal system or just in our normal relations with each other.) James is concerned with the judgement which *presumes*, but we will need to backtrack a bit before coming to this.

To show partiality, James says to us, is to fail to love, and this is to sin. This much is clear enough to most of us. Yet he pushes it further than most of us would like to admit: to sin or fail at this *one* point of the law is quite simply to have failed the *whole* law.

He illustrates this with the example of murder and adultery. In terms of keeping the law, we have no higher standing before God if we are guilty of judging one another than if we are guilty of murder or adultery. To fail to fulfil the law by judging another as unworthy of our help is the same as failing to fulfil it elsewhere.

We might then rightly cry out, “Who can possibly be righteous?”, if the smaller transgression is as serious as the greatest. And when we religious creatures have to answer our own question with “*no-one* can be righteous”, the pessimism is really too much to bear: we are forced to *self-justification*.

And this brings us back to the judgement which presumes. It is this self-justification which is the basis of our presumption to judge of the worth of others, and so the basis of our discrimination and partiality. The basis for judging others as unworthy is that we have judged *ourselves*, and found ourselves *differently* worthy – indeed, we have found ourselves close enough to righteous to dare to claim to be just that.

It is here that we fail the test of belief in Jesus. To believe in Jesus is not to have a religious or moral idea which just happens to be Jesus-flavoured. To believe in Jesus is to trust that I am not what I actually look like to those who might try to measure my worthiness – I am not even what I look like to myself. And this is the case whether I look very impressive, or whether I look very plain. There is more to me than I can say or see, and this more is that I am embraced by mercy. The good news of the gospel is that, as one of those who fails to keep the Golden Rule – what James calls the “royal law” – I have nevertheless *received mercy*, are receiving mercy.

Mercy does not exclude judgement; it just changes the outcome. Mercy recognises that a benefit is not deserved, and yet gives it anyway. James argues that we who have received mercy in Christ are to be merciful to others. While we *might* judge, while we might seek to determine who deserves what, the act of mercy sets those judgements aside and gives without regard to what is deserved, and who is worthy.

Mercy, then, implies that we are not to love merely according to the Golden Rule – as we *would ourselves* be loved – but that we are to love as indeed we *have been* loved, if indeed we claim to have received God’s mercy. As we gather each week around the eucharistic table, we make an enacted prayer for mercy. The table is not merely a fellowship space at which all are welcome but a table for the bringing together of the penitent. The real change which takes place is not that the bread and the wine become body and blood, but that body and blood spilled and broken *by* us become, by God’s mercy, body and blood *for* us. “Amen” we say, to the declaration this is the body, the blood – Amen, Yes: what is Christ’s I receive as my own.

To return to James’ ethical expectation: we say, usually too glibly, that we meet Christ (or God) in the person we serve (cf. Matthew 25.31-46): we are serving *Christ* (how good of us!) But in fact this only occurs when we also experience *ourselves* in the meeting with the other, for we do not discover God without discovering ourselves. What is important in our knowledge of God is knowing ourselves according to God’s knowledge of us.

And so, perhaps we are not so much to see God in the other as to *be as God* to them, seeing *ourselves* in them, *as recipients of God’s mercy*, just as those others might now be recipients of our mercy. James calls us to speak and act as those who are to be judged by “the law of liberty”. The “law of liberty” is the call to serve others because it is in serving we discover how God has experienced and served us, and so had mercy on us also. In serving others, God’s experience of us becomes more fully our own experience.

This is salvation: not faith “and” work (or without work, as James emphasises!), but faith *through* work – mercy received and enacted in the same moment.

As they seek to respond to God’s righteous command for mercy and justice without discrimination, may all God’s people discover in that response the mercy that he has had upon us, and find new freedom to walk humbly alongside him. Amen.
