**Sermon by Haydon Wilcox**

19.09.2021

The last words of James’s letter we heard read today is ‘ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.’

That reminds me that if I draw near to another, if I listen, if I show care, thoughtfulness, and interest then the likelihood is that they will be drawn to me, so that trust, friendship, and mutual respect will grow. Isn’t that the desire we should all have in our dealings with each other, that we should draw near to one another with integrity and honour – in other words in love, though so often that word is misconstrued in today’s culture.

James clearly reminds us, though he doesn’t use these words, that it’s the ego and the quest for power or domination that often damages our relationship with others.

He speaks of envy, ambition, boastfulness, deceit, wickedness, and disorder as the consequence of relational breakdown, when wisdom is absent. James refers to a wisdom that isn’t what we understand it today, for in our culture wisdom is about a learnt behaviour, an outcome of gathered experience that enhances our practice to deliver something. Only look at politicians being interviewed, and you’ll see that wisdom is a learnt skill that deflects the release of untimely information when under interrogation.

No, the wisdom James refers to is the wisdom of a higher authority which is manifested in a good life, where gentleness, a peaceful attitude, gentleness, mercy , justice, truth, and other good attitudes are manifested intuitively. These are the fruits of a life lived through a relationship with God.

Our Gospel Reading today begins with a simple sentence, ‘After leaving the mountain Jesus and his disciples went on from there.’ On that mountain a significant event occurred. Jesus is transfigured in the presence of three of his disciples.

He communes with God and the experience that the three disciples witness is one where Jesus is transformed by a white light, and he is seen in the presence of Moses the law giver and Elijah the great prophet. There is no sense of ego at work in the experience as the disciples appear awe struck and afterwards Jesus counsels them to tell no one. After this divine experience they face the complete opposite – a scene of distress, chaos, and desperation, as a young man is presented to Jesus who is possessed. It’s a complete contrast: the mountain of light and the valley of darkness. It’s a contrast we all face – moments of wonder, joy and peace. Then moments of pain, suffering and sadness. The contrast is all around us.

But we have a choice, James reminds us, upon what we choose to create. Do we want to create relationships based on good and wholesome qualities that we attribute to God, or do we want to create relationships based on the practice of envy, self-gain, boastfulness, deceit, wickedness, abuse, and disorder?

Jesus challenged his disciples on the journey from the mountain because he found them arguing over who would be the greatest among them. Perhaps the three disciples have shared to the others the privilege of their experience on the mountain as they witnessed this supernatural event. Did they evoke jealousy in the band of disciples? What was the cause of this dispute about power and who among them would be the greatest?

Jesus simply teaches with a symbolic act as he takes a little child in his arms and says, ‘whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me, but the one who sent me.’

The child represents someone, who in the law, has no rights, no power, can own nothing, has no monetary value, can add nothing tangible to the adult world and yet teaches us that access to God is not dependant upon privilege, power, position, status, or wealth. For these things will not draw us closer to God.

Today there are many refugees and asylum seekers who have few rights, no power and own nothing apart from their carrier bag of possessions. We are called as a society to show them compassion, but sadly many governments, including ours, are reluctant yo accept that they are fleeing their countries because the nations with power and privilege have, through political and economic interference, assisted in the creation of turmoil that has made their countries of origin unstable and dangerous to live in.

Jesus reminds them and us that instead of seeking advancement we should rather desire to serve others and count ourselves least.

It is an attribute that can’t just be learnt but must purposefully be chosen, chosen because we have the vision for something greater than ourselves and because we want this world to become a better place. Jesus called that better place the Kingdom of God, a society where the character of God would reign.

After the great fire of 1666 that levelled London, the world’s most famous architect, Christopher Wren, was commissioned to rebuild St Paul’s Cathedral.

One day in 1671, Christopher Wren observed three bricklayers on a scaffold, one crouched, one half-standing and one standing tall, working very hard and fast. To the first bricklayer, Christopher Wren asked the question, “What are you doing?” to which the bricklayer replied, “I’m a bricklayer. I’m working hard laying bricks to feed my family.” The second bricklayer, responded, “I’m a builder. I’m building a wall.”

But the third brick layer, the most productive of the three and the future leader of the group, when asked the question, “What are you doing?” replied with a gleam in his eye, “I’m a cathedral builder. I’m building a great cathedral to The Almighty.”

James directs us to have the purposefulness of the last builder as we fashion our lives on Jesus. Jesus himself taught the importance of servanthood to conquer the seductiveness of power.

And we must make a choice on how we are to live and be authentic about the motivation which is truly leading our lives.

One thing when I see what is happening in Afghanistan is that the action of the Taliban is all about power and not of the wisdom of God. The choices politicians and world leaders – are they made with the wisdom revealed in Christ, or are they expressions of expediency to benefit the few and already privileged? The many actions of the Church in history have often been about power and not of the character of Christ.

And you must ask at St. Mark’s when you hold your Parochial Church Council meetings, or you in family life, in your duty at work or in the personal life you lead … are you truly doing the right thing, or are your choices motivated by power and wrong attitudes. Do we want it to change and if so, have we the desire to listen to divine wisdom and purposefully seek a better way – the way Jesus taught us, and the way James later encourages us to live.

Ultimately the choice us ours. The benefits are great. Yet in it we shall lose any hope of success and gain only the promise that in Christ we shall find salvation and one day all things will be completed for the glory of God.

*Post Communion*

Almighty God,

you have taught us through your Son

that love is the fulfilling of the law:

grant that we may love you with our whole heart

and our neighbours as ourselves;

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen