

# Hearing and Obeying the Word of God

## Fourteenth after Trinity

Proper 17

2<sup>nd</sup> September 2018

In Jesus' time, family life was extremely important and loyalty, respect and obedience characterised relationships.

### James

James, the writer of the letter from which we read today, many people believe was James the Just- given the title 'Just' because *of his faithfulness to the law and constancy in prayer* (Moo 1985:20) - first bishop of Jerusalem and ..... brother of Jesus.

James grew up with Jesus. They played together, attended school together, learned carpentry together. Together with their siblings, they would have spent more than 20 years of every day life together in Nazareth.

He and his siblings frankly once thought Jesus was mad and tried to put him away!

He certainly didn't believe that his brother, Jesus was the Son of God!

What brought about the change?

Meeting the resurrected Jesus.

Experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost!

He, his siblings and his mother, Mary, were present with the other disciples praying when the Holy Spirit came in tongues of fire and rushing wind.

James had seen Jesus live his day-to-day life, how

- he interacted with others,
- he taught people
- his interactions with others were laced with compassion and energised by love.
- He had seen Jesus control his tongue – slow to speak, quick to listen.
- God’s word was deeply rooted in Jesus’ heart and life – and he was obedient to it.

And his letter is the result of his observations. If you want to know, *What would Jesus do*, read the letter of James!

James will tell you how to live your faith! He wrote about

- being human,
- how to live your faith in your minute-by-minute, day-by-day life.

**What you do matters** says James.

Your attitude towards yourself matters.

Your attitude towards the stranger in your midst matters.

In the Deuteronomy reading,

Moses speaks to Israel and says

- **Listen** carefully.
- **Obey** what you have heard.
- **Remember** what you have heard.

Do you want to know what God wants?

- **Read** the written word.
- **Listen** to the written word being read – and we do, Sunday by Sunday. (readers, you have a very important task!)

- **Remember** it – memorise if necessary, but let it become part of your life.
- **Do** it

and, says Moses,

- **do not add or subtract** from what I am telling you.

It's really tempting to

- **subtract** – oh you can't be serious about..... and we disobey.
- **add** – adding is more subtle and often done with the best of intentions, but it binds us, ties us up in knots.

What happened, for example, in some Christian circles is

we didn't want to offend God by having premarital sex, so we banned dancing, wearing make-up, going to the cinema or theatre.

Or

we didn't want to sin by getting drunk, so we banned drinking.

We get ourselves tied up with little traditions and expect others to follow them.

- Some people don't eat before Communion. If that means a lot to you, fine, but don't impose it on others. And don't let it bind you. if you have to eat something because of the medication you are on, don't let that get in the way of your time with God.
- Many people eat fish on Fridays rather than meat. In years gone by no self-respecting Christian in certain circles would eat meat on Friday! Why? Did Jesus say so? Was that the word of God?

Many traditions start out well, and originally enabled people in their relationship with God. But then the tradition, not its purpose became more important.

An old Jewish story tells of when some calamity was threatening, Rabbi Israel Bell Shem-Tov, used to get to a certain *Holy Place* in the forest,

light a *Sacred Fire* and say a *Special Prayer*. Every time calamity was averted.

Later, in the time of Nagid of Mezritch, when such threat arose again, he went into the forest and said: 'God, Lord of the universe, I do not know how to light the *Sacred Fire*, but I still remember the *Holy Place* in the forest, and I still know that *Special Prayer*'. Then, he said the special prayer in the holy place. When he returned home, the calamity had been averted also.

Some years later, when Rabbi Moshed-Leib of Sasov found himself in trouble, he went again into that *Holy Place* in the forest and said: 'God, Lord of the universe, I still know the *Holy Place*, in this forest, but I do not know how to light the *Sacred Fire* and forgot that *Special Prayer*. Yet, Oh, Lord, have pity on us and save your people.' This time, too, the tragedy was averted.

Finally, in the days of Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn it was his turn to avert the calamity of his people. Sitting at home, he prayed to God from the depth of his heart: 'Sorry, Lord, I do not know that *Holy Place* in the forest, I cannot light the *Sacred Fire*, and worst of all, I have even forgotten that *Special Prayer*. Yet O God, have pity on us and deliver us from danger.'

And God listened to him and the calamity was averted again.

### **Hearing and Obeying**

Hearing and obeying God is about **congruence** – the inside and the outside are the same – like the sticks of rock candy with the name inside. Jesus called the Pharisees hypocrites. They were more bothered about looking like they knew God, rather than knowing God inwardly.

### **How do we know what God's will for us is?**

James knew what Jesus expected because he had seen for himself how Jesus lived. Together with Jesus he had grown up learning the scriptures and hearing them read constantly. He prayed constantly – there is a story that, because of his habit of always kneeling in prayer for others, his knees had become calloused like a camel's; he became known as *The Man with Camel's Knees*. ([www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com))

Rule of thumb: be obedient to what you know from the Scriptures – it's more embedded in you than you perhaps realise – and from your prayer.

**What has James told us today to do or be?** Look through the passage we read today and see (James 1:17-27)

- God speaks through the words of the Bible. It's sometimes hard to understand, so invest in a good Study Bible, and use it.
- Attend a course on basic Bible understanding. Work at it – an important relationship is always worth working at!

There will be times when a word or phrase or a whole story or paragraph will suddenly become alive for you. God is speaking – don't dismiss it! That also often happens within a worship context.

If you find yourself wriggling – God, you surely can't mean it – be pretty sure he **does**! Keep wriggling and wrestling until clarity and peace of mind come.

Go back to the James reading: Is there one thing that stands out for you? Underline it. Memorise it. Chew on it. Reflect on what it means for you.

## **Conclusion**

*A monk once came to Basil and said, 'Speak a word, Father' and basil replied, 'thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart'; and the*

*monk went away at once. Twenty years later he came back and said, 'Father, I have struggled to keep your word, now speak a second word to me'; and Basil said, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself,' and the monk returned in obedience to his cell to keep that also. (Norris 1998:253)*

God is speaking,

Are you listening..... and ..... are you prepared to do what God asks?

#### **References**

Richard Foster (2005), *Life with God Bible*  
Douglas J Moo (1985), *James*  
Kathleen Norris (1998), *Amazing Grace, a Vocabulary of Faith.*  
David Watson (1981) *Discipleship*  
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