

NOTES FOR A SERMON OR HOMILY

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

Psalms 125

James 2:1-10, (11-13), 14-17

Mark 7:24-37

Levelling out the inequalities

The Christian gospel was, and is, a great leveller. It should be no surprise that Christianity became known as a religion of 'women and slaves' – a community where those at the bottom of society, those who lacked power or status, were taken seriously. The church should be a place where social status and accident of birth are irrelevant, and where all are valued equally, as children of God, and serve according to their gifts.

And yet there seems to be something deep in the human condition which causes us to want to order ourselves into the 'valuable' and the 'less valuable' – sometimes even the 'valueless'. Perhaps it's a way of increasing our own sense of self-worth, at the expense of others? It seems that the church has been susceptible to this from the earliest times. At any rate, James is aware of prejudice and favouritism in the worshipping community to which he is writing.

But Christianity, at its best, is alert to this danger, and to the very real inequalities which exist in the world, and works to bring about a fairer society. It proclaims the possibility of transformation – both of individual lives and of society as a whole. It is this that has led the Church to be passionately engaged in education at all levels, as a powerfully transformative force. We believe in equality and in changing lives; we believe in education precisely because we believe that God calls us to show no partiality.

But it is not only through our work in education and other areas of outreach that this belief is lived out. Our lives together as a gathered Christian community must also be characterised by a real, heartfelt commitment to the same principle of equality. All, whatever our social standing, wealth, abilities, or educational opportunities and achievements, are children of God, and of infinite value.

Letting our theory change our practice

James takes a fairly radical view of the favouritism being shown by his readers. He argues that it is not just a poor outworking of their faith – it actually calls their faith into question: 'Do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?' (James 2:1, NRSV)

In effect, he issues them with a challenge – it's no use having the most perfect theory in the world, if you don't put it into practice!

Universities are places of thought. They teach people to think and reflect. But they are also places where that thought is tested – through laboratory experimentation, through debate and collaboration, through reading and understanding. They are places of research, and, in particular, of research which changes our attitudes and changes the world. In the spheres of politics, history, physics, literature, economics, medicine, engineering and so much more, the thinking which goes

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on is intended to change the way in which we understand society, art, global relationships, and the natural world. Good theory, leading to good practice, leads to improvement in technology, environmental protection, treatments and therapies. James points out that our faith is not immune from this process. It is not enough to believe that all are equal in God's sight, or to wish everyone well, if this isn't seen in our life and behaviour. Our faith is not a thought experiment. 'So faith by itself,' he says, 'if it has no works, is dead.' (James 2:17, NRSV)

If we want a good example of faith lived out in practice, it is surely no bad idea to look to Jesus! And in our Gospel passage, we find an interesting example of a faith that learns, and practise that changes in response to that learning. Jesus meets a woman in Tyre; she is a gentile woman, and Jesus suggests that his responsibility is to the 'the children' – i.e. he is sent to those who share his own Jewish faith, which she does not. But she is a mother of a suffering child, and in her desperation she challenges his perspective. And his response is to listen, to consider, and to learn. And having developed a new understanding, he acts accordingly.

This is excellent research methodology. An idea is accepted, at least as a working hypothesis, until something occurs to challenge it. No idea is so sacrosanct that it can't be questioned in the light of new evidence. Breakthroughs in medicine, development of thinking about a piece of literature, interpretation of historical events – these all come about through a willingness to challenge received understanding. So here, Jesus is modelling good learning and good faith development. And, as a result, he is able to change another life, and reach beyond society's barriers which might otherwise have limited his healing power.

Changing faith, understanding and lives?

Educational establishments, especially universities, are often seen as bastions of the establishment, preserving privilege and power. And undoubtedly, they have that capacity. But at their best, they also change our understanding of how the world works, of human nature, of the nature of God. They can nurture radical thought: the idea that the Earth orbits the Sun; the suggestion that ordinary people can be trusted with Scripture written in their own language; the critical discovery of the structure of the human genome, with all its medical implications – these are all the result of radical minds thinking radical thoughts in university settings. They come about because people understood that learning is something which never ends, and that things we think we understand can be challenged.

Education provides us with a firm bedrock from which we can keep growing and changing. It teaches us to think and to renew ourselves. Likewise, faith surrounds us with a knowledge of God's love for us and for all the world, just as the mountains surround Jerusalem (Psalm 125:2), giving us the confidence to learn and to grow. Education has the capacity to transform lives. So does faith. And both are lifelong commitments, which respond to what we see and do, and in turn are seen in what we do. Both change us, and in doing so, change the world.

Education or faith, if it has no works, is dead.

