

Faith working through love¹

James 2:18–26

faith apart from works is barren . . . faith without works is . . . dead (James 2:20, 26).

The first three Sundays I was with you as locum priest last month we talked about Christian faith. We saw that absolutely central to Christian faith is a faith-relationship with Jesus Christ. We were talking about feeding on Jesus—having Jesus as our food and drink, as that which keeps us going in life. I mentioned Archbishop Geoff Smith in Adelaide, how when he preaches he’s always talking about Jesus, and what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. We saw that our faith-relationship with Jesus is also a love-relationship with Jesus—a matter of the heart—‘I love you with all my heart’. Jesus once said, ‘Believe in God, believe also in me’ (John 14:1). Christian faith is believing in God through Jesus. That is our absolute starting-point.

James this morning extends that to show what faith means. James was one of Jesus’ brothers back in Nazareth. Jesus’ brothers didn’t believe in him. At one stage they tried to stage-manage him to make him famous. But after rising from death, Jesus appeared to James, and then James believed. A bit like our old friend Thomas up here. James became a leader in the church in Jerusalem (see John 7:1–10; 1 Cor. 15:7; Gal. 1:18–19; 2:9; Acts 12:16–17; 15:12–21). On that basis, James knew that faith is not just intellectual assent. Faith means you *do* stuff. If faith does not include action, then it is not faith at all: ‘faith without works is . . . dead’.

If faith, as we’ve been saying, is a faith-love relationship, then that makes perfect sense. Like the husband who came up to his wife while she was doing the dishes and said, ‘Darling, I love you with all my

¹ Galatians 5:6.

heart', and she said, 'Good—here's a tea-towel!' For him just to say, 'I intellectually assent to the fact that you are my wife', without the whole active business of living and serving and working together would just be ridiculous.

In the baptism service, when we are brought to belong to God through Jesus Christ, we are asked some questions about our faith: 'Do you believe in God the Father?' And we say, 'I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth'. 'Do you believe in God the Son?' 'I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord . . .' 'Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?' 'I believe in the Holy Spirit . . .' We say yes to all of that in the words of the Apostles' creed. Then the baptism service in the older Prayer Book asked the question: 'Will you, with God's help, strive to keep his holy will and commandments and serve him faithfully all the days of your life?' And we say, 'I will endeavour so to do, God being my helper'. So what we believe—God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit—followed by what we will do—keep God's commandments and do God's will.

Sometimes in practice those two things—what we believe, and what we do—can somehow become separated out. In pastoral contacts recently I have been amazed, and deeply disturbed, by the number of men who call themselves Christians and attend church regularly, who subject their wives to abuse: emotional abuse, spiritual abuse, physical abuse (domestic violence)—it seems to be rife, and it's just not on. Clearly in their minds there is some kind of distinction between what they believe, and what they do—so much so that you might question whether they really know God as He actually is, or have a living relationship with Christ as the one who 'gave himself up' for his bride the church, and 'nourishes and tenderly cares for it' (Ephesians 5:25, 29). Faith and practice seem to be out of kilter here.

And James is saying: if we think we have faith, but it doesn't show in our actions, then the faith we think we have is dead and useless—'faith apart from works is barren . . . faith without works is . . . dead'. Pretty strong language.

In earlier years, when I was teaching people about baptism, I used to separate those two things out. I would say that in order to be baptised there needed to be repentance, and there needed to be faith and there needed to be obedience—I separated out faith and obedience. Even though we've seen how dangerous that can be. I guess I saw faith as coming first, and obedience following on from faith. Paul the apostle twice in his letter to the Romans uses the phrase 'the obedience of faith' (Rom. 1:5; 16:26). I naturally took this to mean the obedience that issues from faith—we believe in God and so we obey His commandments. Until I was pulled up sharply by reading one of my favourite theologians, when he said: 'by this obedience of faith, of course, is not meant the obedience that grows out of faith but, here as always, the obedience that *is* faith'.² We'll come back to what he means by that, but for the moment it makes the point that we can't separate out faith and obedience. That's the point that James is making here, and we find the same thing throughout the Bible. The apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans, where he naturally expects that those who believe will be 'patiently doing good' (Rom. 2:7). One scholar commented: 'In Paul's mind there is no divorce between believing and doing good . . . The gospel and doing good are inseparable partners'.³ Jesus himself said that, didn't he—he said: 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments' (John 14:15). Not, love me, and then keep my commandments, but, love me, and that's what you'll be doing. What did Jesus say when he was asked what is the greatest commandment? he said, quoting the Old Testament, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind'—that's our relationship with God. But Jesus didn't leave it there; he went on: 'And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself' (Matt. 22:34–39; see Deut. 6:4–5; Lev. 19:18)—you can't have one without the other. The newer Prayer Book couches the baptism question in this way:

² P. T. Forsyth, *The Principle of Authority* [1913], Independent Press, London, 1952, p. 67; emphasis added.

³ David Seccombe, *Dust to Destiny: Reading Romans Today*, Aquila Press, Sydney South, 1996, p. 48

Will you each, by God's grace, strive to live as a disciple of Christ, loving God with your whole heart, and your neighbour as yourself, until your life's end?

And we reply:

I will, with God's help (*A Prayer Book for Australia*, p. 75).

In the reading last week James gave a practical example of loving our neighbour:

if a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead' (James 2:15-17).

You know the Schulz peanut cartoons? In one of them two of the kids were walking through the snow rugged up in their coats and scarves and beanies, and there's Snoopy the dog out there in the cold, shivering away, and they go up to him and one of them says, 'Be of good cheer, Snoopy', and the other one says, 'Yes, Snoopy, be of good cheer', and then they walk off on their way, leaving Snoopy shivering in the cold. That's straight from the letter of James. The Apostle John said the same:

Whoever says, "I am in the light," while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness . . . How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? (1 John 2:9; 3:17).

So in my teaching about baptism I revised my definition of faith to read, faith is 'trusting in God and walking with God in His ways'—all one package. That makes sense if, as someone else has said, faith is 'the relationship of union with' God⁴—the apostle John describes faith as abiding in God (see John 4:12-21)—if God is wholly righteous through and through, and has taken away the guilt of our sin and given us His righteousness (see Rom. 4:6-8; 2 Cor. 5:21), and we are abiding in God

⁴ Geoffrey Bingham, *Living Faith Study 4, 'The Nature and Meaning of Faith'*, 1979, New Creation Publications Inc, Coromandel East SA, 2005, p. 79. (see http://www.newcreationlibrary.net/books/pdf/095_LFS04.pdf)

and God is abiding in us, then naturally what comes out of that will be righteousness in action. Here is another definition of faith that I have come across, from a friend and mentor Geoffrey Bingham:

faith is seeing God as He is and what He is doing, and so trusting and obeying him.⁵

I wonder if you know the old chorus:

Trust and obey, for there's no other way
To be happy in Jesus
But to trust and obey.⁶

The two go together. Geoffrey says:

there is no such thing as faith without obedience.⁷

But this is something we cannot do on our own—he goes on:

One cannot be obedient before receiving the Spirit.⁸

Which is why we sometimes pray: 'Write your law in our hearts by your Holy Spirit' (*A Prayer Book for Australia*, p. 102; see Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 36:27).

So, 'faith apart from works is barren'. Does it work the other way, I wonder? Can we say that good works without faith are barren? James has someone saying, 'You have faith and I have works' (James 2:18). That could be the voice of a secular Australian, couldn't it? Australians have a high regard for people who do good works. If we can be like Fred Hollows, for instance, who cured lots of people's blindness, then we are right up there. Paul the apostle says as human beings we have been created for good works (see Eph. 2:10), so we can be glad when we see people, with or without faith, doing what they have been

⁵ Ibid. p. 74.

⁶ John Henry Sammis (1846–1919), 'When we walk with the Lord', *Living Praise*, Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1983, number 269.

⁷ Bingham, 'Faith', p. 76.

⁸ Op. cit. p. 81.

created to do. But our motives can be mixed. We can do good works to feel good about ourselves. We can do good works to get other people to feel good about us. We can do good works mistakenly thinking that these are what are going to put us into God's good books. We can do good works and still be as proud and self-serving as all hell—and we may be causing more harm than good for those we are doing them to in the process. We can call Jesus 'Lord', and we can prophesy and cast out demons and do many deeds of power in his name—and are these not all good things?—and if we are not doing the will of our Father in heaven, then the Lord can still say to us, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers' (Matt. 7:21–23). It can get complicated. Jesus once said, 'No one is good but God alone' (Mark 10:18). So any real goodness needs to come from God, through the faith-love relationship, by the Holy Spirit—as we say in the baptism service, 'with God's help', 'by God's grace', humbly and 'patiently doing good'. Then we can know we are probably on the right track.

We've seen it's not enough just to have an intellectual assent that there is a God. That is not active faith. James says:

You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder (James 2:19).

The demons, the unclean spirits, knew perfectly well who Jesus was. One of them cried out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God' (Mark 1:24). The unclean spirit knew who Jesus was, but he wasn't on Jesus' side, and he knew Jesus was opposed to him, so it didn't do him any good. James is saying, we could be in the same position as those demons, if we're not careful.

Faith is more than intellectual assent. We *are* to love God with all our mind—so we *do* need to bring all our intellectual faculties to bear. We are to love God also with our hearts, and with our bodies. Faith is a loving and active participation in a relationship with God. So what did one of my favourite theologians mean when he said, 'this obedience of faith... is not... the obedience that grows out of faith but... the

obedience that is faith'? This is what he went on to say: 'faith being the greatest act a will can do, as its absolute self-assignment to the grace of the Holiest and His holy love'.⁹ What does that mean? Faith is laying ourselves completely on the line, trustingly placing ourselves fully into the hands of God whom we know fiercely loves us, and wants nothing less than the best for us, for him to do, with us and through us, what He wants. I'm struck by the radical examples that James chooses to illustrate active faith. Abraham at God's bidding ready to sacrifice his own son, through whom all of God's promises were going to come true—that's a big thing for God to have to sort out!—and then rejoicing when he sees how God is going to do it, through a substitute sacrifice: an anticipation of the sacrifice of God's own Son, for us all (see Gen. 22). And Rahab—a prostitute, of all people!—willing to risk her own life and standing among her people in the ancient stronghold of Jericho, to align herself instead with the God of Israel and Joshua's ragtag army that's just come in from the desert! (see Josh. 2). This takes fortitude. This is way outside our comfort zone. This is laying ourselves on the line, trusting that God is going to have to do something radical. This is what James means by active faith. This is what God is telling us here this morning.

⁹ Forsyth, *Authority*, p. 67.