

Sermon, St Andrew's

James 2.1-10 & 14-17, Mark 7.24-37, 5th September 2021

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,
Amen.*

What do our Epistle and Gospel have to say for us this morning, and how may they fit together?

Well, first, St James doesn't muck about, does he? Apparently the original Greek may be a bit posh for our Lord's brother but, whoever wrote it, this Letter has been loved by many in the Church for its wealth of practical, specific advice, without too much high-sounding theology! It can be very direct, sometimes almost brutal, but it brings pre-Christian community customs into the light and love of the Way of Christ.

So, what do you think of it - how much does it apply to you, to us as a church, to the Church, to our country? Most people seem to think "well, of course we're not like that", and pass on... but James (or whoever!) is surely writing to people who likewise thought they weren't doing anything wrong, and he is uncompromising in holding up a mirror to his community and saying "look! Look at yourselves! This is what you're actually like!" Most of us like to think of ourselves as pretty open-minded, tolerant, non-judgemental people - yet James reminds us that we are almost certainly imperfect in this. It is so easy to fall back into conventional habits of behaviour - or even ones for which our parents might reprove us! It is so easy, when someone new or remotely "different" enters church, to stare, to tut, to say something - almost without thinking. My uncle and godfather once admitted he responded to many things as a traditional man first, and as a Christian second - and he realised

that wasn't right. Modern psychologists now talk about "unconscious bias" - the extent to which our inherited and accumulated prejudices play a bigger part than we think in shaping our reactions - and we're asked to watch ourselves, to keep watch on our reactions (like a cat watches a mouse!) - to be attentive to our own behaviour, to sit back and look at what we actually do toward others. My wife and I are rereading many of my mother's beloved Nevil Shute books, and are shocked by much of the casual racism which must have been so common at the time. Perhaps we ought to watch our own church CCTV footage to see how we welcome new people - it might be quite embarrassing! As a city centre church, we have the joyous challenge that anyone could pop in, in any sort of need or hope - we have no idea who's coming through the door next: in what disguise Christ may come. I love Isaiah's words of Christ, "He will not judge after the sight of His eyes, nor reprove after the hearing of His ears - but with *righteousness* shall He judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth". After my mum's stroke, when she looked so different, I tended to close my eyes and lean in to catch the distant thread of her voice, her consciousness coming back as if from a long way away, and follow that train of her thought - her soul was in that thinking and speaking, not the damaged body and "wiring": and when I try to listen to someone who might not look completely conventional at church (or elsewhere), I'm trying to keep in mind both those ancient words of prophecy about our Saviour, and the still-recent experience so close to home - we learn lessons from those we love, and are invited to sow, spread and scatter these abroad in our lives.

What does our Gospel say? *Ephphatha!* Sounds like a sneeze to me... but this Hebrew word “be opened” is one of the more startling healings in the Gospels - very briefly told here, as so often by Mark. This call to being open resonates greatly with James’ words to the early Church. Each of us, and our communities, are called to open our eyes and ears to what’s going on around us, the cries for help in our world, to people telling us their stories and their needs, their hopes and fears and dreams; not to glance and look away, or half-listen, but to be truly attentive to our neighbour, to what’s really being said, what’s really happening. *Ephphatha* - be opened. Christ calls us all to be an inclusive Church, to be truly open in hearts and minds, to neighbours as to God - to celebrate and affirm every person and not discriminate, whether on grounds of disability, economic power, ethnicity, gender, identity, physical or mental health... any way in which we can differ from each other: Christ died for every single person, even when we can’t comprehend why: because the answer is His unlimited love, too full for our minds to grasp. We are called to be a Church that welcomes and serves all people in the Name of Jesus Christ - to allow all people, in the power of the Holy Ghost, to grasp how wide and long and deep and high is the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Christ opens his arms infinitely wide on the Cross, to embrace all people in His sacrifice.

The commitment to being an inclusive Church (as with some climate targets perhaps!) is an easy one to make, but hard to live out week by week - so easy to fall back into unconscious bias, and let longstanding habits of thought rule our minds. But openness is a healing, a gift, a blessing - inclusion is a grace of God, a characteristic, a fruit of Christian character, in which the Spirit sets

us free from old ways of thinking, not to enforce the outlooks and customs of our upbringing, but to be set free to love, to be instruments of a radically transformed society, where loving others as ourselves goes before all except loving God, from whom all blessings flow. I said earlier that *Ephphatha* sounded like a sneeze - but perhaps it's more of a breath. I learnt recently that my beloved great-uncle (prone to pounding the piano till the pint spilled on top of it) loved the hymn *Breathe on me, breath of God* - not what I'd have guessed for him at all! In praying to be a more inclusive, open Church, community and country (even when this is costly), we need the grace of God in us, Christ's Spirit to broaden and deepen us, gentle and warm our spirits and souls, hearts and minds.

In a month's time it will be 475 years since William of Tynedale was killed for translating the Bible, and his last words were "Lord, ope(n) the King of England's eyes".

Let's seek afresh the Spirit's breath to open *us* to the needs of God's world. In the words of St Teresa of Avila:

"Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours, Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world, Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good, Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world."

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,
AMEN.