**Morning Praise @ Home 20th October 2024**

**Opening prayer**

Blessed are you, God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, you have blessed us with every spiritual blessing; enable us by your power to be true to our calling and live holy and blameless lives before you all our days, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever. **Amen**

**Confession** Let us admit to God the sin which always confronts us.

**Lord God, we have sinned against you; we have done evil in your sight. We are sorry and**

**repent.** **Have mercy on us according to your love. Wash away our wrongdoing and cleanse us**

**from our sin.** **Renew a right spirit within us** **and restore us to the joy of your salvation,** **through**

**Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen** cf Psalm 51

**Absolution** May the Father of all mercies cleanse us from our sins, and restore us in his image

to the praise and glory of his name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

### Bible Readings James 1:19 – 27 Matthew 7:24 – 27

### Reflection from Sue

**Enacting God’s Word, not just listening to it**

We are starting a series of sermons based on a book which features in the lectionary readings this term, the New Testament letter written by James.

Many biblical scholars believe it’s written by Jesus’ next eldest brother, who grew up with him but only became his follower after the resurrected Christ appeared to him. Thereafter, James became the leader of the earliest church in Jerusalem, to whom Peter and Paul reported as they travelled around the Med establishing new communities of Christians.

Within 5 years of Jesus’ ascension, many of the Jerusalem believers were scattered, due to the persecution that erupted after the stoning of Stephen, which is why James is writing them a letter, based on his experience of nurturing those believers which remained in Jerusalem, who he led for 3 decades.

This is the era of emperors Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero – famed for their despotism and callous persecution of believers. Just as Xi Jinping today is placing his image over that of Jesus in Chinese churches, so they demanded to be worshipped as gods. Life was made extremely tough for followers, who were not only facing ongoing opposition from the Jewish religious authorities in Israel, but, further afield, in a pagan, pre-Christian culture. Today, we face a largely post-Christian society – one that ignores God and tells us that anything goes and really life is just about me.

So James’ letter is intensely practical, helping young believers translate their beliefs into a Christ-focused lifestyle as they navigated their way in a hostile world – and it extremely relevant for us today.

James assures his readers that we are never left to puzzle faith in God out for ourselves. V.21 talks about God ‘planting’ his word in our hearts, minds and lives, trusting that, from this, there will grow fruitful Christian lives, what v.18 refers to as a harvest for the new Christ-centred Kingdom that Jesus has inaugurated.

Now, the gardeners amongst us will know that, if we’ve just got some baby specimens to plant from Gordale, we need to clear the ground of any weeds which could swamp them. Similarly, James says that, to aid the growth of God’s transforming message, we need to make space for it by getting rid of what v.21 calls ‘moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent’.

We’re not comfortable using terms like these nowadays, but we forget at our peril that God’s standards of holiness are far higher than the world’s.

* One way to think about moral filth is as something that has taken root inside us – the resentments, the self-centred desires, the bitter thoughts, the addictive behaviour patterns. Just as bindweed can look quite attractive, yet ultimately strangle healthy growth, so these ‘me 1st’ impulses, though seemingly harmless, can twist and contort our personalities.
* ‘the evil that is so prevalent’ can be read as the culture all around us which seeks to permeate our souls. Just outside our garden are some very persistent brambles which keep sending suckers through our soil; if left, the brambles will overwhelm what we’ve planted over the last 18 months, disfiguring what should be beautiful. We all inhabit a society where it’s normal to excuse ‘white lies’, promiscuity, over-indulgence; normal to blame others, or the circumstances, rather than accept responsibility; normal to spend hours each day following lives profiled on social media (rarely to uplifting effect). If we let these cultural norms invade, there’s hardly space for God’s planting to thrive.

Yet it is God’s Word which saves us, not the world’s word. James calls us to let our gardener, God, landscape us with his Word, making a salvation-garden of our life (as the Msg translates v 21). This takes two things:

* Firstly, a shift of attitude, from ‘me 1st’ to ‘God 1st’; in other words, the humility to accept guidance that may initially be challenging or uncomfortable as it cuts across social norms.
* Secondly, actively persevering with exploring God’s Word. It is the fertiliser of our growing faith, gradually shaping our mindset so that we start to echo the attitudes of Jesus.

We access his Word as we read our Bibles; as we pray and listen to the Lord; as we cultivate our companionship with Jesus, God’s Word in human form.

In v.25 James uses terms like looking intently into the perfect law / continuing in it / not forgetting it, which prompts the question: What, personally is each of us doing about engaging with God’s Word?

James suggests that:

* It’s not enough to simply recite prayers during corporate worship – we need to get into personal dialogue with God, **P**ausing, **R**ejoicing, **A**sking and **Y**ielding, as the last few weeks’ sermons have encouraged us.
* That our growth will be stunted if we only give Scripture a casual glance once a week in church – but we would mature in our faith by reading and praying through some verses from the Bible each day, either individually or alongside a believing partner or friend.
* James’ small Christian community met regularly to work through God’s word and learn from each others’ perspectives – could you commit to becoming part of a small home group (that extends beyond the confines of Lent) so as to discover more about how you can live for God? Please see John, Ruth, Philip or me if that’s something you are interested in.

You see, God doesn’t want his people to be ensnared by the weeds of the world, but to freely flourish. And he wants our faith conveyed to those around us, just as a gardener can work out where the light is coming from, by looking at the sunflowers which have turned towards it.

Plants suck up moisture and nutrients from the earth, just as we are fed by God. But there is an expectation that, like crops, our lives will also bear fruit – in other words, that there is an active outcome which can be observed by others. A faith which is so private that no one realises you are actually a follower of Christ brings him no honour at all. God wants to transform us, to reign in our hearts, to impel us to action. And, as v.25 tells us, it is in ‘the doing’ that we will discover blessing.

Throughout his letter, James stresses that we have to ‘walk the talk’, living our lives modelled on Jesus. It’s like the difference between reading a recipe on how to make lasagne, perhaps discussing how lasagne ought to be made, or even seeing a TV chef make the dish … and actually making a lasagne in your own kitchen (which hopefully others will eat).

In today’s passage James gives a few practical examples, which we’ll hear more about in later chapters:

1. Hasty words and hasty anger don’t do our faith any credit. Personal anger (as opposed to the anger all Christians might feel about injustice and oppression) is usually about my feelings, my prejudices being triggered, my personal resistance, my wounded pride, yet as Christians, my feelings shouldn’t take priority over the grace, forbearance and forgiveness that characterise Jesus and which should bind us together as a Christian community, rather than fracturing our fellowship. James says that we need to keep a tight rein on these hasty reactions.
2. Merely ‘observing our religion’ counts for very little with God, who wants us to be involved in practically meeting the needs of those who are struggling – offering friendship to overcome loneliness, providing food to dispel hunger, giving comfort to conquer desolation, investing our experience and finance for those facing economic insecurity. For example:

* Could you tell John Church that you’re available to visit parishioners?
* Might you help with St Nic’s Nippers and thereby encourage young mums?
* Can you offer your services to local foodbanks like the ones in Neston, Blacon and Ellesmere Port?
* Would you train with Christians Against Poverty to help someone in our area struggling with debt?

James expects his church members to demonstrate what they believe.

1. The tricky balance is that, whilst getting out into the mess of our society to help, we shouldn’t let its mess get into us. We’re called to follow Jesus with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind and all our strength, honouring the holiness that Jesus’ death has granted us.
   * If, from Monday to Saturday, we are more concerned about fitting in with social norms than being friends of God, where is our integrity?
   * Or if we give our all to our jobs, our family or friends, yet less than our best within our church community, how does that honour Christ, whose body we are?

James pulls no punches – however his main concern is to encourage us. ‘You have been given so much,’ he says to believers down the centuries, ‘and God is there, longing to give you yet more.’

* The Father has given us a new life which will powerfully keep growing within us as we hear, receive and obey his Word
* And, as v.25 indicates, those who act on his Word will find delight and affirmation in the action – they will know God’s smile.

God adores you. He longs for you to adore him in every aspect of your life. Turn your lives around to face him and experience the sunlight of his smile.

**AMEN**

### Affirmation of faith

Do you believe and trust in God the Father, source of all being and life, the one for whom we exist?

**We believe and trust in him.**

Do you believe and trust in God the Son, who took our human nature, died for us and rose again?

**We believe and trust in him.**

Do you believe and trust in God the Holy Spirit, who gives life to the people of God and makes Christ known in the world?

**We believe and trust in him. This is the faith of the Church.**

**This is our faith. We believe and trust in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

**Prayers of intercession led by Ron**

Heavenly Father, empower by your spirit all Christian people and the work of your church in every land. Give us grace to proclaim the gospel joyfully, not only by word but especially by deed and by the way in which we live our lives

Lord, in your mercy: **hear our prayer.**

Creator God, we pray that you will guide those who administer justice that they may be honest and merciful in all that they do and give wisdom to all who make laws, ensuring that the laws that they make may always prevail for the common good.

Lord, in your mercy: **hear our prayer.**

Father God, we pray that children may be brought up in the knowledge of faith and with a sense of respect and responsibility for others.  Bless the parents of our children, and also the teachers who serve the communities we live in.

Lord, in your mercy: **hear our prayer.**

Everlasting God, be present in all places where there is suffering, violence or pain. We especially pray for those people living through war or oppression and the many who are forced to leave their homes to seek refuge elsewhere.

Be with those who are trying to bring peace in areas of warfare and terrorism and for the relief agencies trying so hard to bring food and medicine to those suffering.

Lord, in your mercy: **hear our prayer.**

Gracious God, we pray for those we know who are struggling with illness.  Bless those who care for the sick, encourage all that is being done for their good and surround them with your healing care.

And Loving God, we remember in these prayers those who have died, those we have known and loved and those known only to you.  Help us to leave them with you in perfect trust, knowing that you care for them - and for us - with infinite love.

Merciful Father, **accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen**

**The Lord’s Prayer** As our Saviour taught us, so we pray

***Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name, Thy kingdom come,******Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen***

**Closing prayer**

God give you grace to become the people He has called you to be, that you may live and work to his praise and glory, and the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us and remain with us always. **Amen**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. **In the name of Christ. Amen**