

The Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity

St Mary & St Peter, Tidenham, and St Luke, Tutshill, 2024

James 3:13-4:3 and 7-8a

Mark 9: 30-37

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

The other day some of us from the ministry team got together, and we were sharing a bit about the joys and trials of our individual ministries. More than one of us who have the privilege of being *retired* clergy, and no longer paid by the diocese, noted that one of the greatest joys of that state is no longer having to go to meetings. I regularly boast that I haven't been to a meeting in five years. What I really mean by that is that I haven't been to Deanery Chapter in 5 years. For those of you in the blissful state of not knowing about Deanery Chapter, this is a regular meeting of clergy of a particular patch, and always inevitably ends up in a competition about how many funerals you have taken that week. It doesn't matter what the topic of the meeting is, it doesn't matter what time of year it is, it doesn't matter whether you had the conversation only last week. Get a bunch of clergy together, and they will enter into competition about how many funerals they have taken, and how busy they are. It's inevitable, and grim. The saying is true: clergy are a like manure. Spread very thinly over the ground they can promote good and healthy growth. All together in one place, they are just a big pile of...

I'm always reminded of those competitive conversations about how busy we are when I hear today's gospel reading. Jesus says to the disciples, "what were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one

another about who was the greatest." Left to their own devices the disciples fairly quickly fall back into the competition mode of life, where my worth is defined by the fact that I am busier, or more important, or more successful, 'greater', to use the term in today's gospel, 'greater' than you. I know I'm okay, because I'm ahead of you.

It is a seductive trap. And it is the way in which the world is wired. Watch coverage of any election pretty much anywhere in the world, but watch the USA in particular perhaps over the next six weeks. The world is set up to pit us against each other, in order to create a rank order, a league table, if you like. And I know I'm doing okay if I'm a bit higher up the table than you are. The disciples were silent, 'because on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest'.

And of course, Christ just pops that bubble of self-obsession by pointing at a child and saying: be like that. If you want to see a system for getting close to God, it looks like a child. If you want - to go back to Miri's image from a couple of weeks ago, *[if you were [in Tutshill the week the geyser blocked the road/here]*, a child is the Haynes Manual for living.

Through this month of September, we are reading our way through the General Epistle of James. James has divided the church little bit over the life of the letter. We know, of course, that Martin Luther was a bit suspicious about the letter of James - indeed famously calling it 'the epistle of straw' -, because it seems to be asking Christians to *do* a lot of things, and there has traditionally been suspicion of putting emphasis on doing things, 'works', to the detriment of 'faith' because it might sound like we can earn our way into God's good books by doing stuff. And that has got church into a fix from time to time.

But actually of course when we read through James, as we have this month, we discover that all of the ‘doing’, all of the ‘good works’ that he is so keen for his readers to prioritise, are nothing more than an outworking of faith. They are the natural result of the Christian’s encounter with holiness. With sanctity. And that is actually what is going on when the life of a human being meets the life of Jesus Christ - it encounters holiness. It meets sanctity. And it begins to become sanctified. That might sound really obvious, but just think about it. When *you* meet Jesus, the nature of your life changes. At the level of your heart, and your soul, as well as the mind and all the cognitive ways that we can think about the life of faith, the heart, the soul, our entire being begins, slowly, slowly, begins to look more like Christ. We are quite literally ‘Christianized’. We start to look like Christ.

That’s the journey that begins at the font at our baptism, and indeed even earlier than that because the Holy Spirit is working in us before ever we or our parents even form the question about baptism in our minds. But it begins in the water, when we are claimed by Christ, and then it continues for the rest of our life.

But then we trip up. Then we get mired. Then we go to Deanery Chapter meeting and begin to boast about how busy we are, and how important we are, or whatever the equivalent is for you. The tongue becomes a fire – about which James preached last week. And the world begins to encroach again, and our Christ-like-ness, though it can never be completely obscured, gets walled about and hemmed in by other things that make us feel more important more quickly and more easily.

Which is exactly what James is talking about in *today’s* reading. James says there is wisdom of *this* world, and wisdom that comes down from above. And we have to try really hard to distinguish between the two. So he talks about examining the

root of our behaviour. And he identifies envy and selfish ambition as the fruit of a failure to be nourished by the wisdom that comes from above. And that lead to disorder and wickedness, as opposed to the purity, peace, gentleness, mercy, and willingness to yield that are the hallmark of a Christ-like life.

When things go wrong in any relationship, including the Christian community, it is usually because we have stopped attending to where we are drawing our wisdom from. And those couple of lines from chapter 4 of James set it out really clearly: ‘you do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly.’ Those lines are often applied to intercessory prayer, and rightly so. If we are worried that our prayers feel like they are unanswered it is usually either because we are not actually praying, or we are praying for the wrong thing. But they can be applied more widely to our motivation in general. What motivates us? Is it the purity, peace, gentleness and mercy of Christ? Or is it something else? Is it to seem impressive and competent and busy and like a better Christian than whoever it is sitting next to you? ‘The disciples were silent, because on the road they have been arguing about which one was the greatest.’

Now the good news is that this struggle is built into the Christian life, so we have a way through. And actually, the last couple of lines of our reading from James this morning is basically exactly what the baptism service says as well. ‘Submit yourself therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you’. In the baptism service we are asked very similar questions. Do you reject the devil and all rebellion against God? Do you submit to Christ as Lord? Do you come to Christ, the way, the truth, and the life?

And as we know, our baptismal promises, just like any other vows – marriage vows, ordination vows, Religious vows -, really have to be remade every morning. And if we can do that, if we can get into the habit as individuals, and actually as congregations and as a parish - and a vacancy is a jolly good time to practice this, when nerves can become a bit frayed, and we can start to get a bit twitchy about who is in control, and what the future might look like - if we can adopt a rhythm of feeling those baptismal promises every morning, turning back to Christ, facing down the devil, remembering the Cross that is inscribed on our hearts and our souls, with which our identity is stamped, then slowly, daily, patiently, we start to resemble the people of the God we seek to follow. We become more childlike. We become more Christ-like. Closer to the image into which, please God, we will grow.

Amen.