

Church at home

East Leake Methodist Church - 19 September 2021

"Come near to God"

It is a good thing to give thanks to the Lord
and to sing praises to your name, O Most High;
To tell of your love early in the morning
and of your faithfulness in the night-time Psalm 92

Let us praise God as we sing:

**Hymn StF 107 I sing the almighty power of God,
That made the mountains rise**

5vv

Prayer of Adoration

We thank you, God!
We want to tell the world what you have done:
your wonderful works.

We praise you, God!
We remember our beginnings
and celebrate belonging together in your world.

We trust you, God!
You are still our help.
We go forward in faith remembering all that you have done.
Thank you God

Amen

Prayer of Confession

For closed minds and prejudice,
our unwillingness to change and failure to love,
Father forgive us.

For thinking we know best;
for our unwillingness to listen and learn
from people who come from other places,
Father forgive us.

For our neglect of you;
for slackness in prayer; for not reading your word,
Father forgive us.

For our failure to witness for you,
for trying to keep Jesus to ourselves and our friends in our local Church;
for our lack of concern for those outside the church,

Father forgive us.

Forgive us for the sake of your dear Son,
Jesus Christ our Lord, and wash us clean.

Pause

Thank you that your Son Jesus came to seek and to save the lost.

It is upon your love and forgiveness that we rely.

We pray in the name of Our Saviour Jesus

Amen

Let us have a moment of quiet reflection as we sing

Hymn 18 Be still and know that I am God

3vv

Readings

Our first reading is from the letter of James. He contrasts the Christian life with the unspiritual life. Our second reading is from Mark's Gospel. It shows Jesus teaching his disciples.

James 3. 13 - 4. 3 then 4. 7-8a

Mark 9. 33 - 37

Address

My address is taken from our first reading, which was from the letter of James. The letter of James is a book of the Bible that most of us struggle to find. When we do find it, we see that it is full of practical tips and advice on how to live the Christian life. It is completely different from many of the other letters that we have in the New Testament. St Paul in his letters sets out the great truths of the Christian religion. James, on the other hand, wants to help us live out our Christian life, day by day.

My text is "Come near to God, and he will come near to you".

Who was the James who wrote this letter? Like many writers in the bible he doesn't give his full name and address, so we have to guess his identity. One good guess is that he was a brother of Jesus. If so, he was the James who became the leader of the church in Jerusalem in the very early days of the church there. His letter is addressed to "all God's people scattered over the whole world" (using the words of the Good News Bible).

James wants to help his readers live out their lives as Christians, day by day. So he draws pictures of two very different sorts of lives. The first is the Christian life. In 3.17 James tells us that:

"the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere."

James contrasts that with the unspiritual life. He talks about where Christians have gone wrong in their lives and why they have gone wrong. In 3.16 we read "where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice."

He goes on to say in the next chapter

“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight”.

Let’s pause there and ask ourselves, had James been reading one of our newspapers or watching our TV news? Some days, when I turn on the TV to see the news, it seems nothing but a record of people fighting, quarrelling or even killing to get what they want.

It would be nice to say that there has never been envy or selfish ambition in the church, but it wouldn’t be true. As soon as you look at church history you can see plenty of examples of selfish ambition. Some of the lives of the popes in Renaissance times were truly shocking. Coming forward to our own times, the sex abuse scandals revealed in various churches, have badly dented the reputation of churches as a whole. The fact that news of these scandals keeps on coming shows, sadly, that there has been a lot of bad, indeed evil, conduct in our own times. Many post holders in the Methodist Church and other churches are required to do safeguarding training to ensure that such things do not happen again.

Let us turn from this unhappy state of affairs to the lovely picture that St Mark gave us in our second reading. He tells us that the disciples were arguing between themselves as they walked along the road. They were arguing about whom among them was the greatest. Jesus noticed. When they got to their destination he sat down, he took a little child and got him or her to stand among them. Then, we are told, Jesus picked up the child so that the disciples could all see him or her. Jesus said:

“Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”

Let’s explore the meaning of what Jesus did and said.

There are three points that occurred to me. The first one, and I’m sure that this has occurred to you too, is that when we welcome a little child our first concern is for the child’s wellbeing and happiness. We don’t think of ourselves: we think of the child.

So this is the complete opposite of what the disciples were doing on the road. They were trying to big themselves up: to show that they should be regarded as the greatest. But when we stop to welcome a child, we think of the child, not of ourselves.

The second point is that when we meet a child we don’t start by judging that child. We recognise that the child needs to be treated kindly because it is small and weak. Of course, after we have been in that child’s company for a while, we may form an opinion on how well or badly behaved they are. But that is not where we start from.

We start by treating any child kindly, because he or she is a child. We don’t start by asking whether the child is a wealthy, important, child or whether the child is a poor child. We don’t concern ourselves with the child’s status in life. No, we welcome the child for what it is. So I think that when Jesus told his disciples to welcome small children in his name, he was actually saying that we should welcome everyone, without regard to rank or status.

Child minding has never been a prestige occupation. Looking after small children means a lot of feeding and bottom wiping: patience and the ability to keep going hour after hour, day after day. So my third point is that in this story Jesus is saying that the humbler roles in life are just as important in His eyes as the grandest or the best paid. Christian values of love and care for others are the opposite of the "have it all" or "me first" society that at times seems to surround us. Jesus says that those who welcome a small child welcome the Saviour Himself.

"Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me;"

So I have now discussed both our readings. I would like to sum up the message of both readings with the slogan JOY. Once I was invited to a service at a black church. The sermon included this slogan and it has stayed with me. Perhaps you know it already:

J Jesus first
O others next
Y yourself last.

Alternatively:

J Jesus first
Y yourself last
O others in between.

I find this slogan helpful in reminding me what I should be doing in my Christian life, day by day.

But how do we reach that state when we are ready to love others and to put their interests first? It is human nature from babyhood upwards to put yourself first. A lot of the training of young people is making them realise that there are other people in the world, who need to be treated with politeness and consideration.

James gives us a key piece of advice when he writes:

"Draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (RSV) or, in a newer translation "Come near to God and He will come near to you" (NIV and Gd News)

We draw near to God by spending time learning about Him in services, by reading our bibles and by saying our prayers. These are all ways to "draw near to Him". Other ways include discussion groups and setting out to help other people - just as Jesus recommended when he picked up that small child and told his disciples to welcome the child as they would welcome Jesus himself.

As we spend time learning about God in these ways, so we come to realise how great God is, and how great is His love for his world. That realisation doesn't come in a flash: sometimes we seem to be getting nearer to God and sometimes we feel further away. But gradually we understand better who He is. I would say that one of the benefits of getting older is to have experienced Him in many stages of life. I can look back and see how God has been with me in the bad times and how He has been with me in the good ones.

As we learn about God's love for His world and as we come to understand that we are included in that love, we are filled with joy. Joy because we know that we are loved

by God Himself. Unworthy as we are, God values us and admits us to His kingdom. And He trusts us to carry out his work in this place.

That love that we receive from God gives us love to spare: love that we may use for other people.

Let us end with the picture that St Mark gave us of Jesus picking up the small child and telling the disciples to welcome that small unimportant person as if they were welcoming Jesus himself. By doing this, Jesus was telling the disciples to welcome everyone to God's love, no matter how small and unworthy they are. In a way, we are one of those small and unworthy people. The story means that Jesus loves us: and that energises us.

A Reflective Prayer:

Father God, strengthen me when my energy is low. Help me to remember who you are and your love for me. Please help me live my life to the full, and to your praise and glory.

We ask this prayer in Jesus' name.

Amen

(prayer adapted from Every day with Jesus 5 Nov 2020)

Let us sing about the love of God as we sing

**Hymn StF 499 Great God, your love has called us here
As we, by love for love were made**

5vv

Prayers of Intercession

There is a response to this prayer

Lord of all,

Response In your name we pray

Dear Lord,
fill your church with love and understanding,
so that she may show forth your gospel love.

Lord of all,

In your name we pray,

Fill your people with respect for each other,
a willingness to listen and a generosity to share.

Lord of all,

In your name we pray,

Enable us to listen to and help
all who suffer through injustice, disability or neglect.

Lord of all,

In your name we pray,

May those who make decisions for us be so guided by you,
that they use their power wisely for the good of all.

Lord of all,

In your name we pray,

May those who suffer in pain, loneliness or grief
know the power of your healing love.

Lord of all,

In your name we pray,

May we,

in all we do and say,

and in all we are and strive to be,

be filled with your loving power.

Lord of all,

In your name we pray, Amen

Let us join in the Lord's prayer. Our Father

*Our final hymn is about living the Christian life, day by day. It was a favourite with
the Ladies Fellowship*

**Hymn: StF 519 Father, I place into your hands
The things I cannot do**

4vv

Closing Prayers

Lord of heaven and earth,

all creation resounds with your praise.

As we rejoice in your presence

may we know your power to save.

Now and for ever,

through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

May God bless us

In our sleep with rest, in our dreams with vision,

In our waking with a calm mind,

In our soul with the friendship of the Holy Spirit

Today and every day. **Amen**