

Proverbs 22: 1-2, 8-9, 22-23
Psalm 125
James 2: 1-10 (11-13), 14-17
St. Mark 7: 24-37

Pentecost 16 2024.

“My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?”
James 2: 1

I encourage us, when we read the Bible, not only to focus on a single word or phrase alone in front of us, but to look for the big picture – the over-arching story of our brokenness and of God’s redemption...

Here is an example from me (when I was much younger, and in seminary – theological college)... [*file*] The assignment was to take an entire book from one of the 66 books within the Bible, and to sketch it out – to look for recurring themes; to see where Jesus is (either visibly, or in the background); to see where there is hope; or sin; or triumph. The point is to not just look at the bark from one tree, but to take time to admire the forest...

I encourage you to try it. Perhaps some rainy Saturday morning, when you don’t want to do the laundry, take your Bible and a couple of sheets of paper and sketch out what you notice. Doodle. Circle or underline key words... You can start with a small book, like Jonah, which is only 48 verses long in total... Have fun with it! Be open to being surprised; or to be challenged...

Another way to see the big picture is to ponder how some parts in the Bible complement or challenge other parts... For example, the Book of Proverbs, which was our first reading this morning, teach clearly that following God’s principles leads to a fulfilling life... The book right after Proverbs is Ecclesiastes. In Ecclesiastes, the author ponders how this life is sometimes unfair, and how sometimes bad people seem to get away with it!...

Both points are true: Proverbs reminds us about the blessings of following God’s way. Ecclesiastes acknowledges that sometimes life is unfair around us – yet God is sovereign...

Here is another example of how one part in the Bible can add to another part: We know that in Paul’s letters, Paul emphasizes the centrality of having faith, not by trying to earn our salvation. Romans 4: 15-16 reads,

For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.
For **this reason it depends on faith**, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all Abraham’s descendants

It's absolutely true, isn't it? We don't earn our salvation... It is a free gift from a loving God, and we receive this gift by being open to it – by having faith, and daring to trust God's promises...

However, it is also true that it matters what we do! It matters what we do... Our second reading this morning is from the Letter of James. James is emphatic that our faith needs to be reflected in our behaviour... If we are being selfish, or aren't truly loving our neighbours, do we really have faith to begin with?...

Bad behaviour can show up in different ways, but the example which James really wants to drive home to the Christian congregations in today's reading is about status, or partiality within God's Church...

The Letter of James was written within about 50 years of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, yet already in the Church there were people who were admiring status, and are looking down on others... James knows that this is inconsistent with being a follower of the Lord Jesus:

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please', while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there', or, 'Sit at my feet', have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? (James 2: 1-4)

A couple of times in this short letter, James is distrustful of rich people who oppress others. Frankly (he writes), we're more likely to be sued in court by the rich than by the poor. Verse 6: "But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court?"

(Incidentally, fighting things out in court seems to have been a persistent problem in the early Church, because Paul also cautions against it in First Corinthians 6...)

So, showing favouritism and partiality seems to have been a real problem, even in the apostolic age, because James takes time to write local churches, challenging this practice...

Of course, this is a caution against the Church in *every* age... Throughout a lot of the Church's history, leaders in the Church have enjoyed positions of status, and by implication, regular members of the congregation were viewed as having a lower status. I respectfully suggest that this is not consistent with the way of Jesus Christ...

I do not mean that we should all put down one another equally... Instead, I suggest we ought to treat everyone in the local church, with dignity and respect...

Do we remember how James and John wanted special status in the life to come, sitting at Jesus' right hand (Mark 10: 37)? Jesus says, this is not the kingdom way.

Consider too, how Matthew 18 begins:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

The humility of child-likeness, the Lord Jesus praises... One more example, from some of the Beatitudes:

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' (Matthew 5: 5-10)

So, let's treat one another equally and lovingly, with dignity and respect...

Speaking of the clergy, I don't deserve any special status!... It's my privilege and my joy to serve you, so that you shine more beautifully with the reflected light of Jesus Christ in your life, and that you are exercising the special gifts God has given *you*, to bring glory to God, and to build his Church and his kingdom...

For the students and families who sit in the back of the Church building, you can sit there if you like, but please know that you are welcome to sit anywhere... (Historically, people of colour were told to sit in the back of the bus in parts of the United States. But we are all equally God's children...)

Faith is essential... The way we live – our behaviour and the way we talk – ought to reflect the faith we have. God expects us, I firmly believe, to treat one another equally with dignity and respect. It was true for the apostolic Church. It is true for the Church throughout the ages. It is true at St. Brice's.

May we all live and shine beautifully for the Lord; now and for ever... Amen.