

Who is wise and understanding among you?

It is quite a question that James asks as he continues to expound on how the community to which he writes responds to the need for wisdom. Wisdom in thinking and actions, but more importantly wisdom in relationships with each other. For James, at the heart of much of his writing is what does it look like for this new Christian community to say that they are followers of Christ – or believers in this new way which builds on the faith and law of their ancestors.

I think sometimes we believe the answers to the questions which James and the like are asking are obvious. We come to these texts with the benefit of hind sight, and also often with some understanding of what the writer is trying to address, but James doesn't see it as obvious for too often our human nature overrides logic, or common sense, or even what might seem to be wise!

At one level James seems to be contrasting values of 'worldly' leaders with those who are leaders in the kingdom of God – but as we know life is not that simple - as both exist simultaneously. Though of course the hope of the writer is that the values of a Godly kingdom would permeate the behaviour of every other kingdom on earth.

*“The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, reasonable, obedient, full of mercy and of good fruits, impartial, sincere.”* In short, according to James, godly leaders make peace (3:18). We may hear, in these words, Jesus' teaching that those who make peace -- or the peacemakers are called children of God (Matthew 5:9), even as both God (Isaiah 45:7) and Christ (Ephesians 2:15) make peace. Moreover, as part of their work, these godly leaders plant a fruit of dikaiosyne (*dik-cos-sin*), a word translated as either justice or righteousness.<sup>1</sup>

James is challenging this young community to consider the leadership that they are both offering and seeking. He doesn't mince his words – the disputes amongst you are caused by your desire for things which are not to be sought. This is not a challenge which was left behind in the early church. So often conflicts within congregations, or even with the wider church are based on desire that are not based in justice or righteousness. James says we shouldn't be surprised by this for in fact we live between two worlds – the one we are born into – and the one we aspire to in God and they often have conflicting values and aspirations -which are a challenge even for the wisest amongst us.

For James the heart of dealing with this dichotomy – this challenge of loyalty - is prayer. Daily, hourly heart felt prayer. Prayer which speaks and listen to God. Prayer which is private and prayer which is communal. *You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.*<sup>2</sup> Knowing what to ask, listening and asking, relates to the way

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3784](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3784)

<sup>2</sup> James 4:2a-3

that we pray. And when we pray in this way – when we take time to meditate before God – justice and righteousness will follow.

It all sounds easy – but as we know it can be a challenge.

I have been watching over the last few weeks the new version of the story ‘Vanity Fair’. The opening sequence starts with the words ‘*A world where everyone is striving for what is not worth having!*’<sup>3</sup>

It is a very clever quote and each time I hear it – it pulls me up short. What is ‘not worth having’? and how do we discern this if in fact we are striving for it.

James says this is actually the heart of the human condition – and this in essence is the seeking of wisdom he is exploring. But this is also the heart of the question and interaction between Jesus and the disciples in Mark’s Gospel today as well.

Jesus is trying to avoid the crowd so that he can have some time with the disciples teaching them, so that they may teach others. But as we have noticed over the past few weeks, every time Jesus draws away to do this, they encounter others. The crowds are so hungry for the wisdom Jesus is teaching, they will not leave him alone. At some level the crowd in Mark’s Gospel seem to be a symbol of those who know what is worth having and they have decided that Jesus is the answer to this, even if it is not quite clear what the outcome of this might be.

In the middle of these distractions from the teaching Jesus is aware that the disciples are having a different conversation. We are not sure how Jesus knows what they are talking about – but we do know they are distracted from Jesus. According to the Gospel account what they are distracted by is something not worth having – ‘who is the greatest!’

But unlike Vanity Fair – Jesus doesn’t say that Greatness is not worth having; rather greatness is worth having – but greatness is not what you think it is!

Like in James who says wisdom is not about knowledge but is based in righteousness and justice. Jesus explains that greatness is not about power, but service; and more importantly greatness is attributed to the most vulnerable and the most excluded in society. For Jesus *greatness wasn’t about power and wealth and fame and all the rest, but instead we measure greatness by how much we share with others, how much we take care of others, how much we love others, how much we serve others*<sup>4</sup>.

David Lose reminded me this week that the definition of greatness Jesus offers seems crazy initially because it is so completely, utterly counter-cultural. He calls us to imagine that true greatness lies in service by taking care of those who are most vulnerable – those with little influence or power, those the culture is most likely to ignore.

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<sup>3</sup> William Makepeace Thackeray’s, Vanity Fair – ITV 2018

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2018/09/pentecost-18-b-a-different-kind-of-greatness/>

This without a doubt offers us a vision for our congregational life. But it also applies more personally. How are we doing, that is, with measuring our success, our greatness, not by what we take in but by what we give away, not by the influence we wield but by the service we offer, not by accumulating more but by sharing what we already have, not by being first but by being eager to work hard in order to see others move ahead?

Earlier last week I was away for a couple of days with all the London Deacons. We have about 42 deacons this year and they have all been in their placements since the first of July – so nearly 3months. We were talking about the challenges of the new roles which they have entered, and the questions of this gospel message came up over and over again; though in different words.

What does it mean to be a leader in a congregation but also a servant? What boundaries are in place to protect family life, but how are we generous with our time and our space if we are called to be leaders?

I don't think this is just a question just for the ordained, I think as David Lose asks that it is a question for each one of us.

How are we growing in greatness in the way that we serve others?

What other things might we be doing?

And how is all that we are doing embedded in, and surrounded by prayer – individually and communally?

Yesterday I went to a special service for a friend of mine who was celebrating, and giving thanks to God because yesterday marked 50 years since his ordination. I was struck that in this celebration he was mentioned very little. And this was done on purpose. For my friend Bill the most distinctive thing in our Christian faith is the fact that we share the Eucharist together each time we meet – and that in this we must let go of ourselves, and allow ourselves to be touched and transformed by God – every single time. And I think he is right. The Eucharist which we share each Sunday reminds us not only of our connectedness with God and with each other – in word and action – requires us to be vulnerable, to let go of our power and to submit to prayer. It is the meal that sustains and informs our service of others, and reminds us that to be great we must offer all over to God – just as Jesus did.

For in the end it turns out that striving for what is worth having means submitting to God in prayer, and expressing this prayer in our lifting up of those who are vulnerable. Amen.