

Reflection 26th September 2021
James 5: 13 -20 By Rev. Caroline Raby

This week we have come to the end of the letter from James. It's a letter which is full of practical and pastoral advice which is as relevant today as it was in the first century.

We are living in a world where suffering abounds. From the ongoing impact of Covid-19, to ongoing wars and forced displacement of children and families, to devastating wildfires, earthquakes and hurricanes. People throughout the world are experiencing suffering it seems like never before. So, as we come to the end of James' letter, it is encouraging to find these timely teachings about prayer, verses which emphasise the power of prayer for the faithful people of God. In these verses, James is telling us that in all of life's circumstances, whether happy or sad, we should be turning to prayer. Prayer should be our first instinct.

To someone with no idea of God, of there being a world other than that which we can touch and see, prayer would seem incomprehensible. It looks at best like an odd superstition and at worst like serious self-deception. Fancy just talking to yourself and thinking it will make a difference to anything! But almost all human traditions, right across history and culture, have been aware of something outside of ourselves to which we turn, usually when times get tough. For those of us who follow Jesus, we know what that something or someone is, and suddenly prayer, and the patience which it involves, makes all the sense in the world.

Prayer must surround everything that we do, whether sad or happy, suffering or cheerful. When we pray, we take our stand in the place where prayer makes sense, at the place where heaven and earth

overlap, and at the place where our own present time and God's future time overlap. That is, after all, what Christian prayer is all about. Tom Wright, in his book *Early Christian Letters for Everyone* says "Prayer isn't just me calling out in the dark to a distant or unknown God. It means what it means and does what it does because God is, as James promised, very near to those who draw near to him. Heaven and earth meet when, in the Spirit, someone calls on the name of the Lord. And it means what it means and does what it does because God's new time has broken into this sad old world, so that the person praying stands with one foot in the place of trouble, sickness and sin and with the other foot in the place of healing, forgiveness and hope". When we stand in that place, the positive power of prayer starts to have an impact on those places of pain, hopelessness and despair.

Over centuries, prayer has carried people from all walks of life through the most difficult of circumstances. For many, prayer is the thing that underpins their faith. It is a link to the power of God—a type of "conversation" with God that exceeds anything of human origin. Prayer is the catalyst for healing, the conduit through which doors are opened, and the assurance that you will make it through today and have hope for a brighter tomorrow. Prayer changes things!

James is not just concerned with individual prayer but with the potential and impact of a praying community. And prayer, of course, is not only a task for the 'professionals', the clergy and Christian leaders. Every Christian has not only the right, but the vocation to engage in prayer, prayer for one another, prayer for sick, prayer for the sinners, prayer for the nation and the world. It can be daunting to pray aloud, but everyone's prayers are equally valid. It's wrong to assume that you can't or shouldn't pray aloud in a group if you don't feel eloquent or can't compose a long prayer. Every prayer that comes from the heart is heard by God; long or short, articulate or stumbling. Don't ever feel

intimidated by someone who always seems to know the right words or can pray at length. Those are earthly standards, not heavenly. God knows all the secrets of our hearts, and he knows what your prayer is. Don't always leave it to the 'professionals' but add your voice to the never-ending litany of prayer and praise.

Time and again we hear people saying things like, 'there's nothing left to do but pray'. Prayer seems to be a last resort. We've tried everything we can, nothing's worked so all that's left is prayer. A final hail Mary if you will. The sad thing is that these words are also spoken by Christians. In all circumstances and at all times we are called to pray. To bring our concerns and need to God and allow him to do the heavy lifting. If you listen to the testimonies of those who pray, you will hear that God has guided them, has steered them into making a good decision, has comforted them, has healed them. Prayer does work, but only too often when we don't get the response we'd like we convince ourselves that the prayer hasn't been answered. Of course, it has – we just don't like the answer we've been given.

As ever, James brings things right down to the practical level as he finishes. Once the lesson has been grasped, that in prayer the Christian stands at the overlap-point of heaven and earth, of the present and the future, there is pastoral work to be done. To see someone wandering off in a dangerous direction and do nothing about it is a tragic dereliction of duty. It may be hard to turn them back – they may insist that they are right and we are wrong! – but the effort must be made precisely in the humility and patience which James has been urging all through. When that is done, a bit of heaven arrives on earth; a bit of God's future becomes real in the present. New life and forgiveness are there in person.

We shouldn't be surprised at this. James knew that his older brother, Jesus himself, had embodied new life and forgiveness. Everything James has been saying flows from that astonishing fact. As we get to know Jesus himself, so the patience and humility, the love and the prayer, the wisdom on which he has been insisting will become part of our lives. These are the 'works' which will demonstrate our faith.

James speaks of the joyful power given to Christians in the name of Jesus. We have been given a share of God's saving and healing power, every one of us. This is not something to be reserved for heroes and saints like, Moses or Elijah, but is poured on us all, through Christ and the Spirit. But that immediately makes us all 'elders. It's no longer somebody else's job to care for the sick, or to notice the lost, it is ours. But if this is burdensome, it also has its satisfactions. Perhaps it feels most irksome when we just sit and worry about it, instead of getting out there and doing it. James suggests that when you pray for the sick, search for the lost, live in close and truthful community with God's people, then you know what you are doing and why. You are sharing in God's great mission to bring his people out of the slavery of sin and death, and into his glorious kingdom.