

Callused Knees, Heavenly Wisdom Will Halse James 3:13 – 4:3,7,8a

We are continuing to learn from the letter of James, following on from Dallas's talk last week about how we use our tongues, and how we use the extensions we now have to our tongues, like email, Facebook and Twitter.

This letter was written by James, the half brother of Jesus, and it is thought to be one of the earlier letters of the New Testament. James was probably quite a small man. He had the nickname 'Old Camel Knees' because his knees were callused through spending so much time praying in the temple in Jerusalem, praying forgiveness for his people. James wrote the letter to Jewish Christians who were in the diaspora - scattered around the Roman Empire. Some of these Christian Jews were very rich and successful, some were very poor.

Wisdom is at the heart of this letter. Wisdom was very important to the Jewish community; then and now. Think of the books of wisdom in the Bible, Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes in particular. And the great wisdom of Solomon. Every synagogue wanted a wise rabbi or teacher – someone who is understanding. And James is directing his words especially at the teachers, the leaders in the community – towards those who aspire to be teachers, to be wise and understanding.

So this sermon is an auto-sermon. I need preach it facing a mirror. I need to preach it to myself; as I aspire to be a teacher.

Let me begin by reminding myself of how Dallas ended her talk last Sunday: 'Let's try to speak with blessing and love to build up and not to demolish. To think about words which honour God. And when we get it wrong to apologise, to forgive, to be more generous, to convey words of healing, and comfort, and to seek better ways of speaking truth, and if they are challenging words, to do that with real honest love with compassion and understanding recognising our own failures in life too.'

Now, if I looked for a title for the letter of James I could do worse than 'Wisdom – Just Do It'. So where can I go from here? Just do it. Who aspires to be a leader, to be a minister in the church? My preaching must begin at home; and it must be done not by words, but by actions. Am I a good, wise teacher? Rather I should ask, do I live wisely? Please don't ask Leena!

So I need to do wisdom, to live wisdom before I can speak it – but how can I do wisdom? What is this wisdom that I should be doing?

James speaks about two kinds of wisdom – bad wisdom and good wisdom, earthly wisdom and heavenly wisdom. The wisdom of the devil, the ruler of this world, as opposed to the wisdom of God's Spirit.

Jesus faced down the wisdom of Satan over forty days in the wilderness after his baptism. This earthly wisdom has two things at its heart – selfish ambition and envy. Selfish ambition can be described as self-centredness, a wrong attitude towards myself, promoting myself. Selfish ambition will try to puff me up. Envy can be described as a wrong attitude towards others. Envy will try to put others down. Envy will set others straight.

What drives us? How do our motives impact the way we live? We need to be very cautious about what passes for wisdom today. There are many conflicting messages – about the pandemic, about sexuality, about illness and suffering, about the environment. David Pawson in his commentary on James suggests: 'Any trace of pulling others down and pushing self up means that it is human wisdom...' It comes from the world, the flesh and the devil – and at our baptism we renounced those things. We are dead to materialism, self, and Satan. But we don't always die easily. It can be easy to ask – if we really did renounce the world, the flesh and the devil, what do we have left?

Well, how about heavenly wisdom? It sounds good but how do we get it, and how does it help us? But perhaps 'How does it help us?' is the wrong question; perhaps it points to a wrong motive.

What is heavenly wisdom – how do we recognise it, understand it? Let's look at James 3; 17, 18.

Heavenly wisdom is firstly pure. It is clean, above board. It has integrity. It is about doing right; rather than about getting the right result. Nothing hidden. Straightforward. Open. It can be shared. No part of it needs to be hidden. It's not crafty, with hidden motives; it's without ulterior motive.

Secondly heavenly wisdom is peaceable – peaceable as opposed to aggressive or demanding. It is not forced on people. The listener, the observer is permitted to question, to think carefully, even to reject.

Thirdly it is considerate, gentle. Not hard and unfeeling. David Pawson again, 'It considers other people's feelings, thoughts and character, backgrounds and interests...heavenly wisdom is a good listener. The opposite of considerate is thoughtless.' Not thoughtless but considerate.

The fourth characteristic is submissiveness; willing to yield. This sounds strange, doesn't it? Surely if it's heavenly wisdom it should not have to yield. Heaven should win, every time. Surely it should win the argument. But heavenly wisdom reflects God's love. It is not imposed. God's love is not forced on us. Other views may be expressed. It does not silence dissent but allows free expression.

Fifth, heavenly wisdom is merciful. It gives practical help. It is merciful, forgiving to those who oppose it. It does not sit in judgement. It gives the benefit of the doubt. Heavenly wisdom stands with the weak, and supports us even when we fail. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Sixth, heavenly wisdom is impartial. In an argument It does not favour one side or the other. I will not always be right just because I am a Christian. Wisdom is not prejudiced. It is not about winners and losers.

Seventh, it is sincere and without hypocrisy. We are getting back to purity again, but also reflecting back to that message of James about wisdom being shown in our lives. Heavenly wisdom doesn't say one thing, but think or do something different. This wisdom has integrity. It is sincere.

Finally, and very importantly, heavenly wisdom bears good fruit. It bears good fruit in how it is lived and in it bears good fruit in its results. But this wisdom does not depend on results. It is not manipulated to try and achieve a particular result. Rather, in the way we speak wisdom and in the way we live wisdom, heavenly wisdom there will be good for us and good for others. Peace and goodness will be sown peacefully and sown well. And peace and goodness will be harvested.

How big will the harvest be? That's not our problem. That is the work of the Holy Spirit. This is all about the work of God's Spirit in and through us. It is simply our work to ask for that wisdom and then be open to receive it and to live it. We ask using the method James used – through prayer, through callused knees; prayer and listening.

So that's my task, and that's our task. Please pray for me, and let's pray for one another. May we receive that heavenly wisdom, may we do heavenly wisdom, and maybe sometimes may we even speak heavenly wisdom in the life of our church and our community. Let's begin with prayer.