

Determined Discipleship: Lose it

Over the last few weeks in church, we've been looking at James' letter to the early church in Jerusalem. The letter was written in a very practical style, getting down to the basics of the faith and wrestling with the practicalities. In a church that was seeing massive growth, people needed to know how to live out what they were following. Often their old lives pulled them back, but James called them to take Jesus seriously and copy him in every aspect of their lives. So far, we have looked at our use of Scripture and the need to make sure that we don't just read the Bible without any expectation of being changed by it. As part of our all-age worship, we were challenged to think about how we live out our faith in 'loving our neighbour' as ourselves – the importance of deeds as well as faith. And then Lottie helped us to understand the need to 'tame' our tongues – to train our tongues to stay silent when needs be, to speak up and out against injustice in the world, and to speak well in honouring the people we are thankful for, and finding good in the people with whom we struggle.

Over thirty-three years ago (when I was young – *really young*), I walked down the aisle to marry Martyn. We didn't have much of a clue as to what marriage would entail and, unsurprisingly, there have been some memorable mountains and a few dark valleys along the way. Our commitment to one another however has been a firm foundation for which I am truly grateful.

A few years after our wedding, I made another sacred promise: I decided to let go of my past and to follow Jesus wherever he would lead me. It was a very personal decision but has changed my life forever, leading to my ordination at Peterborough Cathedral in 2013, and becoming your Rector in 2017. The good news of Jesus is that he really does have the power to totally transform lives, and so we, his disciples, are called to confidently go and disciple others.

Whether your own decision to follow Christ was a specific moment or more a series of moments, the prayers we utter as we promise to be faithful and loyal to Christ all the days of our lives are indeed sacred vows or promises. We are each part of this beautiful covenant relationship of commitment and love. We don't make these promises because anyone is forcing us into it, but because we love God and because he loved us first.

But this wonderful and personal faith is not supposed to be a solitary or individual pursuit. We were never supposed to be isolated Christians working

out our relationship with God on our own, even if the current crisis precludes us from worshipping as a church on a Sunday. James was writing his letter to the believers together and reminds them as a community of their need to stay faithful.

At the beginning of chapter 4, James implores his readers not to be those who constantly want what they don't currently have, striding towards success, significance and all that glittering stuff that we imagine is over the horizon but which never delivers what it promises. If we're not careful, our prayers can become a reflection of this, stuck in patterns of asking for more, rather than considering how we might honour and serve God with what we already have. Our response to the recent shortages of 'essential items' in the supermarkets, may teach us important lessons about what is *truly* essential, and what is merely desire - learning to be content with what we have rather than bemoaning what we do not have. C.S. Lewis hit the nail on the head when, in his book *Mere Christianity*, he said: '*If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world.*' We were never intended to be fulfilled by the treasures of this world, and yet that is so often what we settle for.

So, in chapter 4, James' words provoke us to loosen our grip on the things that distract us, and to keep the main thing the main thing – to fix our eyes on God. As Christians, the way down is the way up: '*Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up*' James says in verse 10. It is as we lose something less significant that we will win something far greater. Even Jesus, when facing his own battle in the Garden of Gethsemane, had to *choose* to go his Father's way as he said, '*Not my will, but yours be done*' despite the almost unbearable cost. Jesus' prayer and action were the ultimate act of humility and the perfect picture of faith and works as one.

We too are called to die to self, to place Jesus and his teaching above all else, to go as the Holy Spirit leads us. So much of our walk with Jesus comes down to the choices we make in life. Each of us has the power to choose what we will say, do, forgive, love, invest in, and pray about. We can choose the company we keep; we can choose what we hold onto and what we release. We can choose whether to make a situation better or worse, to build up or to tear down. When we feel overwhelmed with the scale of all that needs to be done, or the state of the world, particularly the current Coronavirus Pandemic, we have a choice about our response: either we retreat into whatever our

default comfort setting may be, or we choose to do something, to say something, to pray something instead. We can choose to believe the lie that we can't make any difference, or we can press in and press on and follow Jesus through our circumstances, knowing he is with us and is above all things. At this present moment in time, we can make a difference to the spread of Covid-19 by following the advice we have been given (as hard as it may be, particularly if we're living on our own), we can support one another in remaining in contact through the telephone, email and social media, and we can continue to follow Jesus through our own daily acts of discipleship, particularly prayer.

James asks us all to settle the matter in our minds and to deliberately lose the battle over who is in charge of our lives – to surrender fully to Christ. *'Come near to God and he will come near to you'* he says in verse 8. It is a brave and bold decision to surrender to God, but his arms are also the safest and most secure place we will ever find. Without a doubt, declaring allegiance to Christ is the best and most liberating decision we could ever make. The book of James is simply asking us to wave our banner with pride and to declare, by the Spirit, that we are on the Lord's side. And, in these uncertain times, it's the very best side we could choose! Amen.