

**Doers Not Merely Hearers: Sermon Preached at St John's, Devizes,
Sunday 28th August 2021 (The Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity)**

Readings – James 1.17-27; Mark 7.1-8,14,15,21-23

“...be doers of the word, and not merely hearers...”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“The Western mind is like a tuning fork calibrated to one frequency: the Christ story. Hit it with the right Christ figure, and it'll just hum deafeningly in resonance.”

I read this remarkable sentence this week in article by a commentator who is *not*, as far as I know, a Christian believer, but *is* someone who understands the profound impact Christianity has had on Western culture.

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This sentence referred to the international outpouring of anger that followed the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis last May: the brutal public execution of a criminal by morally corrupt authorities behaving with terrible cruelty. The resonances with the story of Holy Week are obvious. Perhaps that is why it inspired such fervent proclamation of salvation for the oppressed through rejection of the currently dominant systems of political power which are transparently compromised.

In countries like ours', the Christian story is woven deeply into every aspect of our mindsets. A few recent decades of triumphalist secularism has not yet undone the work of 1,500 years. Because Western civilisation became the first truly globally dominant one, it is easy for us to presume that the principles Christianity teaches about right and wrong are universal. But it certainly wasn't

part of Græco-Roman culture to exalt the weak or proclaim salvation for the oppressed.

Familiarity can blind us to how *strange* Christianity is – how wonderfully strange! – how subverting of the way that the powerful, clever, and rich try to invent clever ways of making that seem like the natural order of things is for them to dominate others. Only a very strange religion makes a tortured criminal its symbol of divinity, and puts the instrument of His execution everywhere from the tops of its temples to the jewellery around His followers' necks.

The official religion of the Roman Empire proclaimed that the emperor exercised the sovereignty of the gods over human society, manifesting the gods' will. Those gods were often contemptuous of mortals and inclined to be manipulative and cruel to them for kicks. The casually violent Imperial régime that emulated those gods was subverted by the Christian Gospel which proclaimed a new kingdom, one not of this world, one which reversed the accepted understandings of what it meant to fulfil divine will.

What we believe matters. This morning's Gospel reading illustrates precisely this point. In it, the Pharisees come from Jerusalem all the way to Genessaret in Galilee to challenge Jesus about how unorthodox his followers are. This is around 100 miles – or 160 kilometres – and therefore is quite a long way to travel without motor vehicles or trains, even for me. It was a typically demanding effort from the Pharisees whom nobody could accuse of not making huge sacrifices for the sake of their faith. They would, in the words of St Matthew “cross sea and land to make a single convert”; they would put themselves to considerable inconvenience to keep the Sabbath correctly; their desire to live in a way pleasing to God even governed how they went about eating and drinking. They were full of faith. They followed the God of Abraham and Isaac, the same God that Jesus proclaimed and whom we worship today – and the best of them

did so with all their hearts and minds and souls and strength. They were just completely wrong about what God actually wanted from them.

What we believe matters.

I can hear some of you waiting to point out to me, though, that Christian people and Christian countries sometimes behave in monstrous ways. This is where our Epistle reading from St James' comes in. What we believe matters, but if we don't put it into practice, our faith is empty.

It is important to avoid the obviously tempting way to misread James, which is to argue that what we believe doesn't matter, just what we do. That isn't what James is saying at all: James calls us to be not *merely* hearers but *also* doers of the Gospel. The Gospel challenges our instinctive desire for power and control, unpicks our delusions of securing safety through material wealth or high status. But unless we put those revolutionary ideas into practice, we are deceiving ourselves. What we believe matters, and what we do matters. We cannot place these in opposition.

At the same time, as we confess at the start of every Eucharist, we also know that we often will fail to live out the faith that we proclaim. To fail to live up to the best of intentions is part of what being human involves. The secular crusades for justice that have moved so powerfully over the past year will soon start struggling because they assume we can be better. They seem to assume that human beings are naturally good, and only do bad things because of unjust and illogical social structures; therefore if we can reinvent society along rationally fair lines, many of our evils will melt away. But the 20th Century taught us that attempts to build the perfect society end up resembling Hell rather than Heaven; and as Jesus taught us in this morning's Gospel reading, evil intentions come from inside the human heart, not from outside us.

The Christian story about human nature is that while being made in the image of God, we are nonetheless part of a fallen creation, fallen precisely because of human actions, fallen because we couldn't resist material greed, short-termism,

or an egotistical inability to understand our place in the created order. This is the story of Adam and Eve, the Serpent and the apple. There was a tendency for much of the 20th Century to dismiss the Adam and Eve story as primitive and guilt-laden. Now, I don't know about you, but when I look at our burning, melting, grossly unequal, and angry world of 2021, our most serious problems as a species seem driven by material greed, short-termism, and an egotistical inability to understand our place in the created order. We don't need to pretend that Adam and Eve were actual historical figures to understand the penetrating insight into the human condition that their story provides.

Similarly, the Holy Week stories of Judas, the remaining apostles, and Pilate respectively are archetypes of material greed, short-termism, and an egotistical inability to understand our place in the created order. Remember – the Western mind is like a tuning fork calibrated to the story of Christ; it hums deafeningly in resonance to the Holy Week story.

Superficially this may seem less attractive than the secular narratives claiming that a radically better humanity is just on the other side of a breakthrough in the social order; but only superficially. For it is in accepting our deep flaws and fallen-ness that hope for humanity lies. It is when we are honest with ourselves about ourselves that we learn to love ourselves for what we truly are; and in that we learn to love others in all their flaws.

It is only when we accept that we will never make the world a perfect place that our eyes can be opened to the myriad ways in which we can help make it vastly better than it currently is.

In conclusion, remember that Christianity has penetrated our culture so deeply that we risk assuming that the Christian understanding of what constitutes good and evil is universal. In reality, Christianity is a very strange religion that, when it first emerged, sought to overthrow what had been the most common ideas about what living a good life meant. What we believe matters, profoundly: the Christian account of human nature should drive us to care for the weakest,

the most marginalised, and indeed the most despised; it should inspire us to forgive the darkest side of others because it teaches us what darkness in us needs to be forgiven. Those beliefs are revolutionary – but they are also empty if we don't put them into practice.

Now to the only wise God our saviour, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.