

HOW CAN THEY TELL? JAMES 2:14-26

How can people tell that you are a Christian? Maybe you don't want people to know that you are Christian, so you hide it as best you can! There's a theme for another sermon there, but for now let's assume that you're happy that people know. So how can they tell? The people you work beside, members of your family, the people you meet when you're relaxing at the golf club or on bowling green – how can they tell? Is it that you ram the Bible down their throats at every available opportunity, telling people over and over again that they must be saved whether they want to hear it or not and whether they are fed up with it or not? Or is it that you take every available moment to read your bible and pray so that people are left in no doubt how much you value the Bible and prayer and they see you do that? Is that how they know? How can they tell?

Now, don't misunderstand me. Don't for a minute think that I am making fun of your desire to share your faith; I think it a very good thing to do and it takes a great deal of courage; however, there are ways to share your faith that are wise and that make a huge impact on people you know; ramming the Bible down their throat at every available opportunity is perhaps neither wise nor guaranteed to make the right impact. Neither am I making fun of reading the Bible and prayer, so please don't misunderstand me; I am suggesting that if we do these things to show off to our friends how pious we are, then that is not a wise strategy, nor fruitful!

How can they tell? We read these profound and challenging words from James. At heart of these verses is this phrase "*I will...*" (v18) This comes in middle of a piece all about the relationship between faith and deeds, a piece that has provoked a deal of controversy over time. James is clear: "*faith by...*" (v17) "*You see...*" (v24) "*Faith without...*" (v26), his words getting stronger and stronger as he goes on. Good deeds don't prove Christian faith – there are lots of good people in world, doing good deeds, who reject the whole notion of Christianity and God – so good deeds don't prove Christian faith, but the absence of good deeds does suggest if not prove the absence of faith! That's James' argument. Let's follow it.

But first, the reason for the controversy. Some have thought that when James says that "*A person...*" (v24) that he contradicts Paul's gospel. In Romans 3, Paul says that a person is "*justified...*"(3:28) Only faith makes a person right with God; we can't earn God's favour by what we do. Some have said that James contradicts Paul by saying that it is not only faith but faith + deeds. In fact, James teaches that faith in Jesus is vital and that such faith needs to be seen, to be given expression, to be demonstrated by doing good deeds. John Blanchard, an English evangelist has written an excellent book on James, called *Truth for Life* and he uses this illustration: a man was rowing a boat across the river and his friends were discussing this issue; he took one oar out of the water and rowed with the other oar only; the boat went round in circles; so he put that one back and took the other out and the boat went the other way round in circles; only when he had the two oars in the water did the boat head in a straight line for the opposite bank. Blanchard concludes: "Biblical Christianity has precisely that kind of balance. Only the person with faith and deeds working in perfect harmony is heading in the right direction." (Truth for Life p.148) we are looking for that balance today!

The first picture that James paints is a person who doesn't have this balance. "*Suppose...*" (v15f) Words, words, words. There is nothing wrong with kind words, well-meaning words, even the offer to pray for someone in need, but the challenge is for more than words. There is a phrase that is used in church thinking now - 'integral

mission'. This means Christian mission work that cares for the whole person, that has the words of the gospel to tell people about Jesus, and alongside that cares for the physical well-being of the person; we care for their spiritual welfare by helping people to know God and we care for the rest of the person by helping them find food, shelter, clean water, treating HIV/Aids. It is easy for us to speak well-meaning words, to profess faith and loyalty to Jesus, but if that is all we do, these words run the risk of being empty and meaningless. Words, words, words!

Contrast that with this other picture. Abraham was the great man of faith in the Old Testament. If ever someone wanted to hold up an example of a man of faith, then they turned to Abraham; for thousands of years, Abraham was that man and if you read the Bible today you will still see that Abraham is the great example of faith. "*His faith...*" (v22) Abraham's faith was tested when God called him to take his son to the mountain so that he could be sacrificed. Isaac was the son born to Abraham when he was old; he was the centre of all the promises God had made to Abraham and now Abraham was being asked to sacrifice Isaac; what was God doing? But Abraham went; Abraham, aged 100, was willing to obey God even if he did not understand what God was doing. In the end, Isaac was reprieved; Abraham passed the test without the death of his son. "Abraham's faith was brought out into the open and proved to be real by this staggering act of obedience." (Blanchard p153)

There is balance to be found. "*A person... as body...*" (vv24,26) Faith is what connects us to Jesus; faith in Jesus connects us to the living God and to all the blessings of God, the promises of God, the grace, power, peace, and love of God, the favour and forgiveness of God for us. The gospel is there; only faith makes this connection; we can't make this connection in any way other than by faith in Jesus. That faith is meant to go to work in ways that we'll talk about in a moment; faith that does nothing is dead, sterile, barren; the things we do and the kind of people we are, that we become, demonstrate that the faith we profess is real, living, active in us. Deeds on their own can't win God's favour; we can't earn our way into the kingdom of God by being good people and having no faith; that doesn't work either. The balance of the two oars, faith and deeds together, will lead us in right direction.

What do we mean by deeds? There are three areas where faith needs to be seen, demonstrated, put into practice:

1) kind of people that we are – our target is to become more and more like JC. What qualities do we see in Jesus and admire? Well, that's the kind of people we are to try to be. Take away the things that made Jesus unique – His power to work miracles, the fact that He was God's Son and the Messiah – these are His uniquely and not for us. But all that makes Him the perfect human being, the qualities that we see in Him that make Him stand out from crowd - that's what we should aim to be and become. As we seek to become more and more like Jesus that will make us different from people around us. What attracted me to real, living Christian faith, was seeing a different quality of life in someone that I admired and knowing that I wanted to have that quality of life myself. So I set out to find that life; it led me to Jesus; it was the quality of one person's life that stood out in a way that I had never seen before, that was different, and as I discovered, Christ-like. The challenge we face it to become people who live by values and standards that are different from world around us; we look at the world and complain about how bad it is and how things are going down the tubes, but the challenge for us is to give the world a positive alternative lifestyle! This is foundational for all the rest; what we are is the foundation for all that we might ever do; we are to be the right kind of people first and foremost, people who learn to become more and more like Jesus. Especially important that we love, value, and care for other people, that we treat other people well, and are kind, patient, and forgiving, not rude and selfish.

2)doing good in world – who are the most caring people in the community? Who should be the most caring people in the community? It should be Christians, but often we are put to shame by others who seem to care more. So often Christians live in little ghettos, cut off from the community; the only people we meet are fellow-Christians, and the only activities we attend are church meetings; so we get the reputation that we don't care about the community. Or churches have been criticised in the past for only preaching the gospel, only caring about souls of people and bums on seats, rather than care for the physical needs of the people. Yet for every time that criticism is true there is another story: William Wilberforce put his Christian faith into action to rescue people from slavery; Thos Barnardo, a Christian doctor set up first a school, then a home in the slums of London for boys sleeping in streets; Chomno in the villages of West Cambodia preaches the gospel and builds a safe haven for victims of domestic abuse or provides clean water or treats their HIV/Aids. The opportunities presented to us will be different, but the challenge is the same, either to the Church as whole or to us as individuals; to put our faith into practice by doing good for others in the world, in the community.

3)Christian service in the Church – Andrew Anderson is the minister of Greenside Church and Moderator of Edinburgh Presbytery; he set us a task at our last meeting, to send him a postcard telling him why we go to Church! Often, our reaction to Church is all about “what I get out of it”. Some say “It does nothing for me” so they don't come. There is a well-used analogy of Church in the sports event: there is a small number of people on the pitch working their socks off, while a huge crowd sits in the stand spectating and telling them how to do it better. There is another model, a better one, which suggests that everyone is on the pitch playing the game. It is true to say that one way of putting faith to work is by active service in the life of the Church, finding some way of putting faith into practice in the Church's life. There are all kinds of ways in which that can be done and it is certainly better for Church to have fewer and fewer spectators and more and more people taking part in some way or another. If that concerns you, come and talk to me about it later.

Find the balance. Faith connects us to Jesus and through Jesus to the living God and faith is then put to work in making us more like Jesus, in doing good in the world, in Christian service – that is the balance, that is the balance Biblical Christianity has always tried to find. How can people tell that we are Christian? The best answer to that question is: by the kind of people we are, by the qualities people see in us, by the different way we live and behave; by our attitudes to work and to other people; by the things we value in life; by the good that we do; by the part we play in Church. This is faith being made complete by what we do. This is balanced Christianity; this is how people know that we are Christian; this is what draws others to Jesus, people whose faith is important enough to them that they live it out. Find that balance: let your faith and deeds work together in perfect harmony!