

“OUTWARDS IN CARE, CONCERN & EVANGELISM”

James 1:19-27

Adrian Plass, of whom many of you will have heard, wrote a book of stories called *The Final Boundary*. I haven't read it, but the author referred to it in another of his books – some daily reflections called *When You Walk*. He wrote in there about a story from *The Final Boundary* called “A Letter To William” which concerned a fictitious situation in which salvation by faith had been replaced by a new system stipulating that mankind could only be saved by climbing Snowdon three times every week. Talking about climbing didn't count, nor did the singing of climbing choruses, nor did constructing small models of Snowdon to be symbolically ascended and descended by the congregation each Sunday. He then goes on to say, “*I've been asked many times about the exact meaning of the story and usually produce long, complicated explanations. Not any more. I shall just say, 'Read the book of James'.*” And we've read a bit of that this morning – the bit that Adrian Plass had in mind when he wrote what we have just heard. And James writes about getting on and **doing** it.

We've read that passage because we've come to the last phrase of our mission statement which we've been considering over the past few weeks. For those of you who didn't know, we have as a church, set out what we think God is calling us to do and to be here in Lichfield – “*A church at the heart of the city, with Christ at the heart of the church – a church where lives are being changed by God and his people look upwards in worship, forwards to growth and maturity, and outwards in care, concern and evangelism.*” It's always on our notice sheet and on the back cover of our church magazine, as well as on the walls of most of the rooms in these buildings. As Christians, as followers of Jesus the Christ, whose lives are being transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit, we find ourselves worshipping God out of a sense of wonder at his work in creation and love in salvation, and we look to grow in our knowledge and love of Jesus as we read the Bible, pray and interact as fellow travellers with Jesus.

But that can all become very introverted. We could easily spend all our time in our holy huddles, singing, praying and discussing stuff – all very worthy activities, but really benefitting no-one but ourselves. We need to look outwards, beyond the confines of our Sunday services, prayer meetings and house groups and allow what we read and hear here to influence the way we live and make a positive difference to the places where we have been called to live and work day by day. Being part of a church – however whizzy and wonderful its mission statement – is all about demonstrating the values of the Kingdom of God, not just about expanding our knowledge or indulging our love of worship songs. Eugene Peterson translates the last two verses of this passage like this in *The Message*:

“Anyone who sets himself up as “religious” by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world.”

Part of the key to understanding what James is writing here is to work out what he means by “*religion*”. It's a word that doesn't have a very good press these days. Those who have nothing to do with it – particularly the likes of Dawkins and Hitchens and their New Atheist trendies – will try to convince you that religion is the root cause of all the troubles in the world. Others, from within the Church or on the fringes of it, would say that it's not about religion, it's all about relationship. There are those whose slogan is, “*Hate religion: love Jesus*”. You can see where they're coming from, but religion in that sense of just ritual and institution isn't what James is writing about here. The Greek word translated here as “*religion*” – and that's the word that is used in every English version I looked at – is “*threskeia*” which is, as William Barclay amongst many others points out, a word that means “*worship*”. It's to do with what we offer to God and how we manifest that in our whole lives. The great preacher W E Sangster used to use a phrase, “*Service not services*”, which kind of encapsulates what this is all about. In his comments on this passage, Alec Motyer writes, “*‘Religion’ is a comprehensive word for the specific ways in which a heart-relationship to God is expressed in our lives.*”

In other words, religion which is acceptable to God is about our hearts beating in time with his, about our hearts being filled with the same concerns and following the same priorities as God's. And pretty well wherever you look in The Bible, you'll find that God's heart beats for the poor and the needy, for those who are disadvantaged and disenfranchised. Of course, God loves every single one of us – without question – but there is clearly, as David Sheppard put it in the title of his book, *A Bias To The Poor*. We could spend the rest of the morning looking at references to that in the Old Testament and in the teaching of Jesus and the writings of Paul, Peter, John, James and the others, but just one example from *Psalms 68:5*, “*A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling.*” There, and in the words we've read from James this morning, the poor and needy are exemplified by orphans and widows. That's not to say that they are the only focus of our attention, nor that we should ignore everyone else. They are mentioned here and in many other places as representative examples.

You see, in a world such as the one inhabited by James and by the Psalmist, orphans and widows were likely to be the very neediest people in the community. In a society that was as patriarchal as that, where there was no state welfare system, those left without a parent or a husband had nothing. They were at the very bottom of the economic heap, with no-one to look after them or provide for them. They may have had other family members who could take them under their wing, but if not they were completely destitute. It's people like that who stir the heart of God and who should move his people to compassion too.

Because we are not talking here about our general kindness, the natural human response of concern that is shared by most people in any community. We are talking here about whether we truly reflect God's concern. Jesus demonstrated that in his own life as he touched lepers whose disease sparked fears of contagion, as he dined with tax collectors who were effectively betraying their fellow citizens, as he spoke with the prostitutes who had to sell their bodies to try and keep themselves alive, as he mixed with the poorest and the most despised people of his day – as well as with the rich and well-to-do. Jesus didn't just tell others to show care and concern for those outside their own little coterie – he actually got on and did it: his heart beat in time with the heart of his Father God.

For Jesus, as for us, taking seriously our worship of God means some kind of action – it means doing something, something positive, something to help those who are really struggling. That might not mean literally reaching out to widows and orphans – although for those of you who foster, or who are involved in Live-At-Home, it might. For some (as with Doug and Lainey, amongst others) that means trying to identify with the poor by living on £1 a day and passing on the money saved. For others it may mean getting involved in Late Night Listeners or prison ministry or helping with the homeless or in projects such as Christmas Day Together. For yet others, it may mean giving sacrificially or giving time and energy to help administer projects. And much as we try to help each other within the church through our always inadequate attempts at pastoral care, we are really talking here about those who are outside the sphere of the church. We're thinking about looking *outwards* in care and concern.

The word that is translated in our NIV Bibles as “*look after*” is rendered in some versions as “*visit*”. It's the same Greek word we find Jesus using in what must be the scariest bit of teaching he ever gave: *Matthew 25:34-46*. There's no doubt there that Jesus is referring to people who are beyond the orbit of the Christian community. And he seems to be suggesting here that this is a clear indication of people's commitment to him. Those who get involved in these ways of showing care and concern are rewarded, whereas those who don't reach out with care and concern to the hungry, the migrant poor, the destitute, the diseased, the imprisoned are cut off from him for eternity. Those words I quoted a few weeks ago from Shane Claiborne and Tony Campolo suddenly and frighteningly come to mind – “*What if Jesus really meant what he said?*”

You see, we are not called to demonstrate our acceptable religion just to our own, to those who are part of our families, our fellowship and our friendship groups. We are called to allow our hearts to beat in time with God's heart as he reaches out indiscriminately, generously, abundantly to all who are in need. He shows a prodigal love, a love which is scandalously unconcerned with a person's doctrine or behaviour, but only with their immediate need. Jesus demonstrated that, didn't he, as he healed all who asked, with no questions to them about their relationship with God or whether they believed in the truth of the God's word. He helped the Roman centurion, the cheeky Gentile woman, the despised tax collectors, the unjustly accused adulteress, the graveyard demoniac, the abandoned lepers, the brazen prostitutes, the superstitious woman with the bleeding, the isolated and ignored Samaritan woman at the well. He reached out well beyond the boundaries of acceptable Jewish society. And he calls us to do the same, to follow in his footsteps, to allow our hearts to beat in time with God's heart.

It would be great to be known as a church where there is always lively worship on a Sunday – led by our talented musicians and involving great activities for kids. It would be wonderful to be known as a place where God's people are biblically literate and growing in faith, increasing their knowledge of God and his word. But that would only really be recognised by people who are already "in the know", as it were. What if this church at the heart of the city was truly known as a place where indiscriminate and scandalously sacrificial love was shown to anyone who was in need? What if this church was known above all else by the community around as a place that was full of real concern, where the rich shared their resources with the poor, where the educated and articulate spoke up on behalf of the bewildered and confused, where the skilled used their God-given gifts on behalf of the disabled and disadvantaged, where the artistic and imaginative brought colour and carnival into the lives of those for whom despair or desperation had left them imprisoned in the darkness? What if this place was known as a church where true religion was demonstrated by joyful involvement in the lives of those whose hope has been sucked out of them by the pressures and pains of a world obsessed with celebrity and success?

You know, if we could truly start living like that, seeking God's will and doing it – if we could get to the point where our hearts are beating in time with the heart of God – then I think the last bit of our phrase this morning (which we seem to have avoided until now) might start to take care of itself. If we are living as God wants, then we'll always have a way in to evangelism. You ask those who are involved in Late Night Listeners, those who host Christmas Day Together, those who serve Monday Lunch, whether they ever need to engineer opportunities to tell others about Jesus or to pray for people in pain. God has blessed us here with all kinds of resources, gifts, talents and advantages and we are seeing those used in his service in diverse and amazing ways. But if we don't go on developing them and using them effectively for him, Jesus tells us that it will be a crying shame – and we will be the ones crying.

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Questions for discussion

1. What are "*the values of the Kingdom of God*" which we are supposed to be demonstrating? Why is it better to do that as a church rather than on our own?
2. How did Jesus reflect the concerns of his Father's heart? Should we be trying to follow his example – or was that all specific to Jesus?
3. Read *Matthew 25:34-46*. Do you find it unsettling? Why/why not?
4. What if Jesus really meant what he said?
5. How can we put into practice what James (and Jesus) have been saying? What difference might it make to our church if we did take it seriously?