

Rebecca Newland St Philip's 3rd September 2006

Pentecost 13B: Song of Songs 2:8-13, Psalm 42:1-2, 6-9, James 1:17-27,
Mark 7:1-8, 14-23

Let the Word go to your heart

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

On Friday night David and I went to see the movie “An Inconvenient Truth” which is a documentary about climate change. It was a very compelling movie and where before I had been slightly sceptical about the whole global warming crisis by the end of the movie I was a true believer. What convinced me were not the pictures of glaciers melting or of polar bears dieing in the ocean because they could not find ice thick enough to rest upon but the science. One particular graph wiped out all my doubts. It showed 650, 000 years of Antarctic ice core CO₂ level samples. Right at the end in our time the measurements were almost off the chart. They indicated that CO₂ levels and the higher temperatures that result were not just part of the normal cooling and warming cycle of the earth. The other piece of science that convinced me was the chart that collated all the 950 odd articles in scientific journals that dealt with global warming. Not one article disagreed with the basic hypothesis that the earth is heating up. There is no disagreement in the scientific community about global warming if published papers are the guideline.

Now global warming is a major, major issue. The consequences will be profound – for coastal towns and cities, for pacific nations, for drought-affected Africa, for food production worldwide, for millions of species worldwide. Yet we do have the ability to turn it around – we just need to lower green house gas emissions. There are a zillion ways to do that, which if enough governments, communities and individuals all over the world did then the trend would change. Even if the worst-case scenarios are not realistic then there is still no harm in the long run making the difficult decisions and changing our lifestyles that eat up the earth. After watching the movie I do not think we can afford to take the chance that the science is wrong.

[Linda interupts “<http://www.climatecrisis.net>]

I came home from the movie turned off the heater, vowed I'd use more public transport and write to politicians. What was interesting for me was the fact that I had been preparing this sermon and had decided to preach on the letter of James, our second reading.

The key verse in the letter of James is 22 – *“Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves”*. Commentators say that this verse is a summary of the whole epistle. For in James we have a theology that talks of the vital importance of action, not just faith. It talks of the need to put the word of God into deeds that actually make a difference. And make no mistake the Word of God does clearly point to the requirement that we be good stewards of earth. We are meant to care for this beautiful planet that God has blessed us with. We are not meant to pillage, denude, destroy and make the earth uninhabitable for the rest of God's creatures. We are not meant to eat the earth up in the pursuit of material possessions and excessive lifestyles.

How though do we hear the word of God and become doers? It seems distressingly obvious to me that the word of God is more often than not heard and then forgotten. I am including myself in this observation. How do we become doers? If we go back a little in the passage James says this – *“welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls”*.

So the first step in putting into practice what James encourages us to do – to be doers of the word - is to welcome the message. When James was writing the way that most people received or took in a message was through hearing. There are two ways to hear something.

The first is when we hear a message, an idea, a word of enlightenment and the words stop at our ears. We hear the words but they go no-where. Sometimes they reach our heads and stay there. They become part of all the other great ideas and theories we have ever heard. Academics are great at this type of listening. In our western culture most of us are. We are a society assaulted from all angles with ideas, abstractions, messages and images. In many ways we live in our heads. This way of hearing does not move us to change or do things differently.

Such hearing in fact lulls us into thinking we have heard the message, have understood it and then have all the answers. It stops at our brains but does not reach our hearts.

There is an old Jewish story I read while doing my background study for this sermon - A young man once came to a great rabbi and asked him to make him a rabbi. The rabbi stood at the window looking out upon the yard while the rabbinical candidate was droning into his ears a glowing account of his piety and learning. The young man said, "You see, Rabbi, I always go dressed in spotless white like the sages of old. I never drink any

alcoholic beverages; only water ever passes my lips. Also, I live a plain and simple life. I have sharp-edged nails inside my shoes to mortify me. Even in the coldest weather, I like naked in the snow to torment my flesh. Also daily, I receive forty lashes on my bare back to complete my perpetual penance." And as the young man spoke, a white horse was led into the yard and to the water trough. It drank, and then it rolled in the snow, as horses sometimes do. "Just look!" cried the rabbi. "That animal, too, is dressed in white. It also drinks nothing but water, has nails in its shoes and rolls naked in the snow. Also, rest assured, it gets its daily ration of forty lashes on the rump from its master. Now, I ask you, is it a saint, or is it a horse!"

When the word of God gets only to our heads we can act like we have the answers. We can even tell these answers to other people. We can have all the outward trappings of a Christian but none of the signs of love. We will be more like horses than saints.

When we only have the outward trappings then our traditions, rituals and symbols become less than useless. They can in fact divert us from what faith is really all about. The Pharisees and Sadducees of Jesus day, those expert Bible teachers, the religion professors with their equivalent Ph.D.s in theology and hermeneutics, those devout guardians of the faith, the religion experts, the senior pastors and serious churchgoers of the time all knew and understood their tradition thoroughly.

Yet when they got themselves in knot over what Jesus followers were eating and not eating, doing and not doing Jesus comes back with the following answer – It is not what we eat or take into our bodies that is the problem – it is what comes from within, from the human heart that all evil comes. Our traditions, our ideas, the good messages we have heard will not ultimately help us or anyone else. It is only if they have entered our hearts and transformed the potential there into expressions of Gods love that they will have any benefit for ourselves and others.

When the word goes to our heart and slowly over time transforms our hearts then our actions will be in accordance with Gods ways.

Now you might ask what does this mean for me each day? How do I know if my heart is in the right place, if it has been transformed by hearing the message? How do I know if I am living through and in a place of

freedom and love?

Well the short answer is we don't. However there is something we can do that can help the process and move us ever close to the perfection in Christ to which we are called. It is to pray and meditate or another way to put it is to contemplate. The interaction between contemplation and social justice and action is well known in the Christian tradition. The Quakers are one group who immediately come to mind but there are many other examples.

Contemplating the word of God, letting it filter into our being and soul, being humble enough to listen – as James says welcome with meekness the implanted word - is one of the primary spiritual disciplines.

Contemplating God in our surroundings, in nature is also one of the contemplative arts. Contemplation or prayer and meditation is without a doubt the one, absolutely essential Christian practice. As one of my oldest mentors says it is the one thing necessary, the one thing necessary, for lasting heart transformation.

That is what prayer is – not trying to get God to do what we want but letting the prayers we offer and the contemplation of the word and the nature of God change ourselves, change our hearts and thereby change our actions.

And then by our fruits we will know.

Are we faithful, generous and humble? – Then we are on the right track

Do we build people up, honour them and keep confidences? –

Do we have hope, a heart empty of resentment and bitterness and can we forgive those who wrong us? – Are we quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger?

Do we care for the needy, the orphan, the widow, the poor, the outsiders? – then our religion is pure.

Do we really care for the earth, are our footsteps as gentle as they can be, do we make the hard decisions that make the difference? – then our hearts are changing.

Do we maintain the values of love, peace and justice even if the world around us tells us they are pipe dreams, irrelevant and pointless? – If so our hearts are in the process of being transformed.

The epistle of James might seem like it is all about doing but it is one of the most balanced of all New Testament writings – from it we discern that it is from our transformed being that right action, right loving

ensues.

May the word of God live in us and bear much fruit to Gods glory. Amen