

Sharing together. and Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 15th August 2021



Readings: Song of Solomon 2.8-13; James 1.17-27; Mark 7.1-8 and 14-15

Sharing Together

Do any of you have a dog? I remember ours from when we were first married. She was named Ruth, because like the Bible's Ruth she was with us always, wherever we went - even when we went from living in Stockport, Cheshire to Johannesburg, South Africa. Well, more about dogs in a moment.

James helps us to see that our ears and our hands are equally important.



He says that there are some things which are really important to *hear* with listening ears. One of them is that life is a gift from God. And like everything God gives, it is good.

At the same time, James says that what we *hear* is to shape how we *live*, using caring hands. **We are to put into action what we hear.** So, if what we hear is that life is a good gift from God, then we are asked to live so that the lives of those around are like good gifts.

Here's a story of how one man's life was made so much better by ... a dog. It's about *Bobby*. You can see a statue of him on George IV Bridge in Edinburgh, where Bobby lived in the middle of the nineteenth century.



Ruth Brown tells his story in her book called *Greyfriars Bobby*, because it's all about how Bobby lived in the churchyard of Greyfriars Kirk, just off the George IV Bridge. She writes:

"Bobby used to help his master, Old Jock, guard the cattle, which were brought into the city each evening for the market following day. The story goes that, in the mornings, after work, Jock and Bobby would visit the café owned by Mrs Ramsay, who would always save special titbits for Bobby – a bone, a bun or even a piece of pie. On their rare days off they'd walk for miles in the hills where Old Jock had lived as a boy. But in the winter they would stay in the city, still guarding the cattle

despite the freezing winds and bitter cold that eventually made Old Jock so ill that he died. And on a grey morning, Bobby followed his master for the last time – to the churchyard of Greyfriars [where Jock was buried]. He got as close as he could to Old Jock and that’s where he stayed. But how cold and hungry he was that night, huddled against the great, granite stones. He remembered the café – if he went there himself would there still be a bone, a bun or a piece of pie saved for him? Of course there was – and when Mrs Ramsay found out where Bobby was living, there was food for him every day. The people were so touched by the loyalty of the little dog that they looked out for him and looked after him. He was given his own engraved collar, and water bowl, and, best of all, official permission to live in the churchyard – and that’s where he stayed for fourteen years, until, finally, [in 1872] he too was buried there near his beloved Master, Old Jock.”¹

Can you think of any ways in which we can be ‘doers of the Word’ – a good to others as Bobby was to Old Jock, as we help them experience their life as a gift, whenever we make real the love that God has for them?

So for example, gestures that can make another’s life seem like a gift from God might include:

- being kind to new people at school
- giving to the Foodbank
- welcoming refugees
- speaking to people living on the streets rather than walking past them

Song

Frere Jacques

Frere Jacques is a song that teases Brother Jacques about sleeping, and urges him to get up and ring the bell for the morning service: ‘sonnez les matines!’

We are going to borrow the tune, and think about James urging us not just to listen to God’s Word, but also to put it into action

Servant Jesus, Servant Jesus,
talks and walks, talks and walks;
words are seen in action, words are seen in action:
love’s made real, love’s made real.

Sermon

I LETTERS

Not many letters are written without an audience in mind. What would be the point? Even an open letter, whilst not to a specific recipient, is meant to raise issues with anyone who will read it.

The Epistle of James is similar. We don’t quite know who the intended readers were; scholars reach different conclusions. But there’s an apparent gist. The people are facing some challenges and trials, and James has some advice. The challenges and trials may be poverty; James includes a string of ideas about the disparity between the wealthy and the poor. There’s some theological debate, too, around the relationship between faith and works; what we do and what we believe. It leads to one of James’s most famous points, that ‘faith without works is dead’. (2.14f) And then, right near the beginning of the letter, there is the stuff we heard about anger, selfishness, and quarrelling. Verse 19 gives us clear guidance, which is far from innovative, but for James as for many other religious writers before and since, it is crucial: be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger.

¹ Brown, Ruth 1995 *Greyfriars Bobby* London: Anderson Press

If James was writing today, he would easily find similar issues to address, whether his audience was within the church or beyond it. Disparity between the rich and the poor – in our own strikingly unequal city and across the globe - is writ as large across our era as it was across the first Christian centuries. Discussion of the relative priority of what we believe – our doctrine - and what we do – our deeds - keeps the church busy today as much as it ever did. And exhortations about when to speak and when to listen have never been irrelevant, nor have cautionary words about when anger is good and when it isn't.

It's that final point upon which I would like to reflect. And I want to consider the merits of speaking, silence, and anger in this bellicose world, in affairs of the heart, and in the contemporary life of the church.

II THE WORLD

Looking at the world, I am vexed about Afghanistan both for Afghanistan's sake, and because of the ease with which that crisis displaces every other vulnerable country from our newscasts. Nevertheless, Afghanistan is of supreme importance at the moment, partly because of nightmare that is being visited upon its people, whether they stayed or left, and partly because what happens there has grave implications for so much else of the global community. It is more than obvious that the use of volatile language is singularly unwise. All the more so that which is ill-considered and intemperate. I could wish that people would desist from words like imbecilic – not because they are wrong, but because resort to such terms won't put anything right. In such a situation, slow to speak is indeed wise, as are slow to anger and quick to listen.

But – there's always a 'but' isn't there - I note James does not proscribe speaking and anger. It is not that they are outright forbidden, but that we're not to rush at them. The Bible does not depict God as incapable of anger, nor Jesus, either. The righteous anger that tackles error and threat, flawed judgement and unjust policy has a place in today's prophet as much as it did in the day of Jeremiah and Amos, to name but two. And so it is that silence is too easy. Those crises created by human blunder cannot be ignored just because we are to be slow to anger. By 'doers of the Word', they need calling out in constructive ways that offer alternatives. Anger and speaking out go hand in hand, yet their real merit is only to be found when they're accompanied by listening to the issues that each party has and that need to be resolved if there is to be that peace which unrelentingly presses for the common good, instead of the power of one over another.

I suppose we might each use different words to describe our response to what has been happening this week in Kabul. My own reactions have ranged

- from *incomprehension* about 'how did we let that happen?',
- through *pastoral concern* for the couple at Fulbourn URC whose grandson has been one of the British army officers at Hamid Karzai International Airport this week,
- to the strong sense that we need to explore urgently and thoroughly how we can *use this building* to be part of Cambridge's welcome to refugees who arrive amongst us.

Somewhere in all of that there is anger and action that need to be carefully competent but not so nuanced that they are emasculated until we do nothing. 'Be doers of the Word.' Watch this space as we see how we can partner with all Cantabrigians of goodwill so that 'the voice of the dove is heard in our land.'

III INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Marriage has been much on my mind of late, with the weddings here last week of Dan and Katie, and next week of MJ and Rob – and please do remember both couples in your prayers. Looking at our most intimate relationships, poetry about which we find in the Song of Songs, we could be forgiven for thinking that they're flourishing is dependent upon extravagant sensuousness, and self-absorbed elopement. And yes, what a joy those things can be. But not without St James' sage words about

speaking, listening and anger as essential building blocks, too. When we resolve to live in the closest possible union with another person – be it in marriage or not – we do well to heed Kahlil Gibran’s words in *The Prophet*,

‘Love one another but make not a bond of love:
let there be spaces in your togetherness,
and let the winds of the heavens dance between you.’

Yes, the Lebanese Christian poet is winsome and wise all at once. But even letting there be spaces in our togetherness is not the only answer to the challenges of intimacy. You see, walking away from a relationship’s crises might indeed enable cooler reflection and a calming of what had become impossibly tense. But the time will come when conversation is needed to sort things out, and it’s in such conversation that James injunctions come into their own. ‘We need to talk’ is a good start, and few of us will get through decades of togetherness without such moments. And talking is about careful listening as well as thoughtful speaking. How crucial it is, though to heed what James actually says. Be slow to speak’. He doesn’t say, never speak. Particularly when ‘we need to talk’, the conversation partner who will not say anything is not only really frustrating, but also refusing to play their part in working towards the healing and wholeness upon which fresh starts are so dependent.

IV THE CHURCH

And lastly, there is the church itself. Where do slow to anger, quick to listen and slow to speak fit into our life? Those who take God seriously, and not least those who recognise God in Jesus of Nazareth, can be passionate. The call to discipleship is not an invitation to be lukewarm, but to know oneself arrested, inspired, and changed by the presence of the Spirit that was in Christ. To have the same mind that was in him, is not about fence sitting, but loving God with heart and soul and mind and strength. Subtlety and understatedness are fine; in fact, I rather admire them as charisms of one who is Christ. But in our tradition, the ideas and contributions of everyone are invited and welcomed. Church Meeting in particular is a forum for shared thinking. It’s not just about giving everyone a voice, but listening to each other in order to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church. So James offers a helpful trio: be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow anger. Again, ‘slow to speak’ is not about never saying a word but about one being as ready to learn from another as to cast one’s pearls before them. I am sure that Church Meeting is as vital now that our building work is completed as it was when we were trying to decide what to sit upon in the sanctuary. We are about discerning how most authentically and effectively to be the Body of Christ in these pioneering days, when the task of evangelism has a renewed urgency. I want to urge our mutual engagement in the consideration of this important issue. It might be in a formal Church Meeting, where debate leads to decision, or in a more conversational and deliberative meeting such as the Evangelism and Service Group has organised for 21st September – in person, in this building. It will work if we are quick to listen and sensitive about when to speak.

V CONCLUSION

I said at the outset that James 1.19 wasn’t saying anything others hadn’t said before and after him. Maybe that’s because it is an enduring and self-evident truth, to which in the assemblies of the nations, in the conversations of the home, and in the councils of the church we do well to devote ourselves. Such is the way of Christ and his followers, as much today as ever before.

N. P. Uden

29th August 2021