

The letter of James: 'Healing & forgiveness' (5.13-20)

Let me be quite clear and honest about it. I am not a righteous person. Elijah was and I am not. It rained on my wedding day and I couldn't do anything about it. I've learnt my limitations. When couples look at my for intercessory help for their wedding days or fete organisers say to me 'Come on, vicar, surely you can do something about it' I have learnt that the wisest course is to be Canute-like – he, you will remember, wisely refuted the idea that he could stop the tide coming in. I simply tell them 'I don't do the weather, I'm afraid.'

I'm not sceptical about the power of prayer. I think James is telling us that these things are possible. Elijah after all was a human being like us. Fervent prayer is a good thing, but the truth is that while I have seen many things that look to me like answers to prayer, much of the time our fervent prayers don't seem to be answered. While sometimes when we pray for healing for someone, there is remission in the cancer or the pain goes away, often – frankly - it doesn't. What has Elijah got that we haven't?

The letter of James, you may remember, is now thought by many scholars to have been written early in the life of the first church, earlier perhaps than Paul's letters. It is written probably by James the brother of Jesus who became the leader of the first church in Jerusalem – the earliest and, even in Paul's eyes, the most authoritative church of the first decades of Christianity. James became leader after Peter and the other apostles were dispersed from Jerusalem by either persecution or their mission or a mixture of both. That Christian community according to Luke writing in the Acts of the Apostles lived a form of Christian life of which the monastic communities that arose in the second and third centuries were a direct successor. They sold everything, shared their wealth, lived a common life, devoted to prayer and the breaking of bread in memory of Jesus. The letter of James is the preaching of the leader of that community, the abbot if you like, who is writing around to other Christian communities inspiring them to the ideals of mission and ministry that are in direct continuity with the teaching and ministry of Jesus. It is the sermon on the mount – or perhaps, more, St Luke's version, the sermon on the plain, preached into the context of those communities. The language and content of the letter of James is much closer to the gospels than the letters of Paul. Much scholarship used to think that James and Paul represented two different and clashing types of early Christianity – a battle won by Paul when the Christian church in Jerusalem fled and dispersed shortly before the Roman destruction of that city in AD70. But modern scholarship now tends to think that while there were rival types of Christianity in those early decades James and Paul were actually more or less fighting on the same side. James represents the Gospel taken and translated into the world of 1st century Palestine and Syria and surrounding, perhaps Semitic cultures, Paul represents the expansion of Christianity into the whole of the Mediterranean region and to its imperial capital in Rome.

The sort of Christian communities James is addressing are basically like synagogues. They are not quasi-monastic like his own in Jerusalem. They are more like medieval parish churches where those who might come in may be devout or not yet really Christian, the humble poor or the powerful rich looking who might be spiritually curious or touting for business. James seems to imply that it wouldn't be a surprise to find murderers in those congregations – just as you might have found here in medieval times. It is perhaps not surprising that the leader of a church where everyone is poor should spend much of his letter warning of the dangers of riches. A bit we missed out between last week and this says:

Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. 2 Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. 3 Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure[a] for the last days. 4 Listen! The wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. 5 You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts on a day of slaughter. 6 You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you.

Notice incidentally the similarity with the sermon on the mount – 'do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.'

But notice too 'the righteous one who does not resist you' whom the rich have condemned and murdered, just like they did to Jesus. The righteous in James's eyes are, like Jesus, the little people, the poor who are blessed, the meek who will inherit the earth, the pure in heart who will see God.

In our gospel reading there is a passage of generosity – those who are not against us are for us – do not think that it's only those in the camp who can do my work. But then we have some fierce words – Jesus could be fierce, but look what provokes him to fierceness:

If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck...

The little ones are Jesus's followers, the ones who receive the kingdom of heaven like a little child, the ones who have renounced everything for the sake of the gospel, the poor. The little ones are, like Elijah, the outsiders who have embraced poverty and a life of hardship for the sake of the gospel. It is their prayers we should seek; it is their prayers – the prayers of the powerless – that are powerful.

I believe in miracles. I don't believe in every story told of the saints. I think we are right to be deeply questioning and sceptical of many miraculous claims, but I have no doubt that Jesus went around and healed people and I have no doubt that many of his saintly followers have done the same – such as St Francis of Assisi. I'm not sure whether he talked to the animals or not, but I'm sure he healed people and I also have no problems believing that he received the stigmata, the wounds of Christ on his hands and feet. He was able to do that by the power of prayer and because he was of the number of the righteous, those like Elijah and many early Christians who following Jesus embraced poverty and powerlessness in order to discover and to share the riches of God's grace.

Another Francis has been in the headlines this week, one who though the powerful head of the Catholic Church has styled himself after the holy friar of Assisi. Before going to the US he went first to Cuba where his visit has been somewhat underreported in our media perhaps because, as one commentator put it, 'they all speak a foreign language there'. But his visit to Cuba and his effect on that country has been extraordinary. Marxist and officially atheist Cuba may have been, but Catholic Christianity runs deep there and communism – well, perhaps it's not that far away from the practice of James's Jerusalem church. Francis was with the poor, the little ones. Here's the end of an account I read of his visit:

In a veiled reference to decades of Communist persecution of the Church, he praised grandmothers and mothers for 'keeping open a tiny space, small as a mustard seed, through which the Holy Spirit continued to accompany the heartbeat of this people' and called for a Church 'which goes forth to build bridges, to break down walls, to sow seeds of reconciliation.'

On his way to a meeting with families in Santiago's cathedral he went among the ones he calls the holy faithful pilgrim people of Cuba... Then he left for Washington DC – in itself a historic act of bridge building - much like Jesus departing the holy family of Bethany for Jerusalem, fortified for the challenges ahead.

And, I might add, there he chose not a limousine but a Fiat 500 to make his journey into the capital – not a stallion but a donkey. Francis understands the way of Jesus. How powerful and effective may his prayers be for all of us in a world as much in need of healing and forgiveness as ever.