

Practical wisdom
19 September 2021
High Street Uniting Church Frankston
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Read: James 3:13-4:10 (The MESSAGE translation)

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=James%203%3A13-4%3A10&version=MSG>

Mark 9:30-37

Today in our reflection I'm going to be taking us through the passage from James starting immediately where we left off last week, when the focus was on the importance of our words and speech in the whole integrity of our lives as followers of Jesus. I'm going to follow James' own preaching fairly directly. I'm going to reference both THE MESSAGE translation as we heard read, and also a more standard translation, the New Revised Standard Version.

So let us pray.

*As we approach this text and listen for your call, guide us, O God, by your word and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover our peace; through Christ our Lord. **Amen.***

The passage starts with a question, so let's start there too. Do you want to be counted as wise?

This is a pretty important question to start off with. I guess that if you consider that the alternative is to be counted as a fool, then wisdom has something going for it. Though in James, the opposite of wisdom is less about foolishness and more about lacking integrity. Because as James defines wisdom, as we shall see, it's very much about integrity.

But we still have to start with the question: Do you want to be counted as wise? There's no point in listening further if you don't.

Perhaps like the disciples in the today's gospel story you'd prefer to be seen as great. But that seems to lead down an unhelpful path; the disciples end up being reminded that Jesus is all about welcoming the least powerful, the most vulnerable.

James heads in a similar direction. If you want to be counted as wise, says James, show it by the way that you live, with good works done gently and humbly. This requires the kind of wisdom that knows that you are loved by God and that you don't actually need the approval or acclamation of anyone else; and so you can just do what is good without fuss. The desire for recognition is one of the temptations or needs that some of us feel, but we need to be self-aware enough to recognise when we are looking for approval rather than just doing what is good, because it's good.

Others of us face temptations and needs around feeling envy, or perhaps around selfish ambition. James says that even if we do feel that kind of envy or ambition, don't be boastful

and false to the truth. Again, it comes back to being satisfied in yourself, not dwelling in envy, which is usually based in what has or hasn't happened in the past, that you regret; or dwelling in ambition, which is based on what might or might not happen into the future, which you may not control; James calls for us to be reasonably well centred in the present. History we can learn from, but we must see it through the redeeming lens of Christ; the future we can hope for and work for, but we must trust it in the coming work of the Spirit; the present, though, is where our essential living is, and the presence of God is with us here.

Here James makes a connection back to the poor use of words and speech, when we catch ourselves up in comparisons with others and end up with bitterness and infighting.

Does this apply to us? Let's recall that in the first instance this is a letter to James' fellow Christians – maybe the Jewish and Gentile Christians that James has sometimes mediated between, as each sometimes considered themselves superior. Who are the other Christians that we compare ourselves with, or to whom we feel superior? Even as a group? Do our words betray our pride, or do our works demonstrate our wisdom, our humble service?

Real wisdom, says James, is holy, or pure – depending on your translation – in the sense of being attuned to God even in the mundane aspects of life. James talks about being peaceable, getting along with others. I don't think that that means that James never ruffled anyone's feathers, but he valued relationships, and so was reasonable, gentle and merciful, and avoided being "two-faced". As Eugene Peterson's translation in the Message puts it:

You can develop a health, robust community that lives right with God, and enjoy its results, only if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honour.

The reasons why it is hard, says James, lie within ourselves. Wars and quarrels don't just happen. They come from within us. As Jesus said, what makes us impure is not what is external or what you eat, but what comes out of our hearts, and out of our mouths.

Yesterday there were more protests against the lockdown, including violence. In general, there's a place for protest, of course: the Christian church is right to stand to advocate for the most vulnerable and for the creation, and James wants us to actively pursue what is good, but violence comes out of pursuing things selfishly. Instead of risking violence to get your hands on what you want, James asks, why wouldn't you think of asking God for it? Maybe you know that it's selfish, he suggests. And being selfish is flirting with the world's values: being wilfully proud rather than willingly humble.

Again I find myself wondering who James is preaching to. What is his word to us in this?

Perhaps it is the next word. "So let God work his will in you."

In a letter which is all about faith in action – humble action - there is still at the core the central calling to let God work in us, to transform us within. James says that it isn't hard – 'resist the devil and he will flee' is set in the context of the God who draws near. For those who know the 12-steps program for recovering addicts, to say that it isn't hard to resist the devil might be minimising it, but setting recovery in the context of the higher power of God, however understood, is our strength. In some ways, this is the kind of place that James takes us here: when you hit rock bottom transformation begins with your inner life, through being humble before the God who loves us and lifts us up.

In this is integrity. In this is good works without fuss or acclamation. In this is the wisdom of God, if we want it.

In the name of Christ.