

Twenty Fifth Sunday of the Year 2021

Wisdom 2:12; 17-20, James 3:16-4:3, Mark 9:30-37

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I firstly want to say a big thank you for making me feel very welcomed during my summer placement and for those who have endured the slow process of me learning from them. I will be starting my second year of ordination training at Wycliffe next month and I still have much to learn, which I'm sure you're about to realise! Especially in contrast to the one who comes to speak after me next Sunday, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. Secondly, I would like to direct our attention to a very important verse in the first chapter of James: "*Know this, my beloved brethren. Let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger*" (Jas 1:19). Please, if only for the next 10 minutes, do remember to be slow to anger!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Today's reading from James comes from the end of chapter 3 and the beginning of chapter 4. James chapter 3 draws out some of the difficulties of the second exhortation in that important verse in chapter one, be slow to speak. Throughout the chapter we read that "*we all make many mistakes,*" *that the tongue is like a small fire which sets ablaze a great forest. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse each other.* "*If you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.*"

Chapter 4 then takes us through some of the effects of not living out the third exhortation in that verse from the beginning of James, be slow to anger. "*What causes wars, and what causes fightings among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members? You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war.*" It's difficult to consistently love each other in the way that we know we're capable of. We all make many mistakes. What should we do? "*Know this, my beloved brethren. Let everyone be quick to hear*". What does it mean to hear?

At the start of Deuteronomy 6 there is the famous Jewish prayer called the Shema which I expect many of you know. It was and is a prayer prayed twice a day by observant Jews, a practice which Jesus was very likely to have grown up doing. The first word of the prayer in Hebrew is the word “Shema” which is normally translated as “hear”. The Hebrew does not mean hear in the passive sense. It means an active obedience, allowing one’s identity and actions to be shaped by what is heard and so the word Shema is sometimes translated as “obey.” The prayer goes, *“Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”* To this prayer, Jesus adds a second commandment, *“Love your neighbour as yourself.”* Be slow to speak, slow to anger, let everyone be quick to hear, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might and you shall love your neighbour as yourself. Easier said than done.

Today’s reading from the Wisdom of Solomon starts, *“Let us lie in wait for the righteous man, because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions; he reproaches us for sins against the law”*. What is the law? Jesus states that all the Law and the Prophets hang on two commandments, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and to love your neighbour as yourself. The Jewish scriptures are structured differently to our Old Testament. They are divided into three sections: The Torah, which is translated as the Law, and also the Writings, and the Prophets. At the time of Jesus, the part of the canon called “the Writings” hadn’t been set in tradition and it was still being debated as to what was and what wasn’t to be included in this section of the Jewish scriptures. As such, when Jesus says that all the Law and the Prophets hang on two commandments, he doesn’t just mean that these two commandments are two important rules. No, on these two commandments hang the whole of Israel’s scriptures, Israel’s history. The entirety of Israel’s foundational story can be summarised as the commands to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and to love your neighbour as yourself, and Israel’s struggle to learn how to do this.

Because of the righteous man’s inconvenience, the protagonist in our reading from the Wisdom of Solomon desires to test him with insult and torture and to condemn him to

a shameful death. Is this love? No. Who is the righteous man? Jesus Christ. Who is Jesus? He is truly God and truly man. What are they not doing by insulting, torturing, and condemning him to death? They are not loving God and they are not loving their neighbour, both embodied in Jesus.

Jesus knows that this is to happen. *“The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.”* After 8 chapters in the Gospel of Mark that focus on glory and success, Jesus reveals that his glory and success will come not through killing, but through being killed. Whilst his disciples glorify themselves, arguing with one another about who is the greatest, Jesus is obedient, loving God and loving his neighbour even unto death. Know this, my beloved brethren. Let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.

This is a difficult task. Do we love God or do we love our own identity, projected onto eternity? It is easy to turn the particular purpose or way of being, through which we encounter God into the totality of who God is. Who or what is God allowed to love? Do we love our neighbour or do we draw them into our own fantasies? As friends, as parents, as employers, as Christians. What does it mean for us, in our particular contexts to obey God? What does it mean to love our enemies? What does it mean to truly listen to somebody? What does it mean to love ourselves?

After the Shema in Deuteronomy 6, the Israelites are told to *“Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart ... Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead.”* In the book of Revelation, when God’s people live in intimate proximity to God — the Father and the risen Jesus, in the unity of the Holy Spirit — in the new creation, *“They will see God’s face, and his name will be on their foreheads”* (22:4). On the temple of their heads, they will not bear the name of God in vain. They will be sealed by the one who is the end, the end of the law and the prophets, the goal of Israel’s story, the one who loved God and his neighbour completely in his death, a death over which, along with the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Saints, we weep, this death being the labour pains of the glorious resurrection, the birthing of the first truly human one.

As we come to the sacrament of the Altar, know this, my beloved brethren. Let everyone be quick to hear. To hear the revelation of who God is and to live in the freedom that comes from that, and to hear the promise that we will be conformed to his image, able to love God and to love each other, in this life and the next, sealed with his name.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.