

Reflection for Pentecost 15 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

"You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors."

James, in 2nd chapter of his letter tackles the delicate and emotive issue of discrimination and does so with a particular focus on discrimination found within the church to whom he is writing: a church which appears to be characterised by a tendency to show favoritism based on outward appearance: people are being treated differently from each other - some are welcomed others not.

What James is saying is as relevant today as it was when he wrote and is worth us reflecting on because discrimination is not a thing of the past, it is all too often still found within modern society even within the church, if not on the surface, then lying dormant just below the surface.

James starts by noting that Jesus is our glorious Lord Jesus Christ and that commitment to him is not compatible with partiality in our lives and in our church communities. God's love, which we are called to reflect, is seen most clearly in Christ through his life, death, and resurrection: a love that is not something reserved for one group - but for all - something the early church had to learn and understand as it grew and expanded away from Jerusalem, taking in the gentile world.

To illustrate his point James like Jesus, uses a parable to paint a picture.

Two people, strangers come into church. One is well dressed wearing a fine suit the picture of somebody important and well off. The other is dressed in clothes that are falling apart, even dirty, and they look as though they do not have anything in their pockets.

Having painted this picture James asks his readers two questions

1. How do you treat each one?
2. Why do you treat them this way?

Having got those he is writing to, and us, thinking, James goes on.

If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes, saying, *"Here's a good seat for you,"* but say to the poor man, *"You stand there"* or *"Sit on the floor by my feet,"* have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

The challenge here is to look at those around us as God looks at them, not through glasses of one kind or another that colour our perception with the result that we make judgments based on wealth, class, colour, nationality, gender, age, or religion all things that can and do create barriers between people.

What does God see as he looks at those two people enter church?

Three things help us answer that question.

Firstly, we are made in the image of God: we all look like our heavenly Father.

Think back to the story of creation and the sixth day: God said, *"And now we will make human beings; they will be like us and resemble us. ... So, God created human beings, making them to be like himself. He created them male and female."*

We are all God's children whether we be rich or poor high up the social ladder or at the bottom, and God loves each and every one of his creatures and does so equally. This love is seen at its fullest in Christ, who did not become in every way like us just to offer salvation to a chosen few, but rather suffered death on the cross so that he could offer God's grace and salvation to all. Whether we accept what God has to offer is another story. But, in the sense of God's love and grace being for all, it is a universal offering.

We see this in our gospel reading where a Syrophenician woman, a gentile, comes to Jesus. He makes clear that his current role is to reveal to the Jews God's message; but as he sees her faith Jesus, she is not rejected because she does not fit into the right category, rather she is accepted, and her daughter is healed.

Do we view those we meet in that way, as God's children in his image?

Secondly, God does not look at the outside rather he looks at the inside. He sees what can be - not what is. He sees how his hand can turn upside down so many of our so-called values. Think back over the pages of scripture and the stories you find. Time and again God does not use the high and the mighty, those we would push to the front or offer the best seats to, rather, he chooses those who are least significant.

Moses - a disgraced prince, & a murderer.

King David - a humble shepherd boy not even present as Samuel starts to choose the next king.

Peter - a fisherman, all too quick with his mouth, not thinking about what he was saying.

Paul - a very religious man but one set on destroying the Christian Church at birth.

Mary - a young girl from the lowest part of society chose to have one of the greatest responsibilities that could be given to anyone - to be the mother of our Lord.

That is God's way of looking at things, it should also, with the help of the Holy Spirit, be ours too.

Thirdly we need to take a careful look as James reminds us at what it means to love our neighbour. *"You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'"*

Loving *'your neighbour as yourself'* (Lev 19:18) is called the *'royal law'*. Jesus had already declared this Old Testament command, along with love for God, as the summary of the whole law. For James the law is indivisible.

The question we need to ask here is what do we mean by our neighbour?

We are not talking about a limited group of people, those we have some sort of affinity with, those who live next door, or our close friends. We are talking about a much bigger group. We could even say everyone.

If we start, as we should as Christians, to look at those around us in this way – as being made in the image of God, seeing them as God sees them, we begin to see everybody as our neighbour. Discrimination starts to get wiped away for, as James reminds us, it should not have a place in the Christian community. Both those people walking into that church should be equally welcomed, loved, and cared for. And that should be echoed in our lives.