

FARNHAM PARISH CHURCH

Reading: James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Mark 9:30-37

Date: 23 September 2018

Theme: Pastoral Care 1

Starting a new series of sermons on the essentials of our church life: Worship, Pastoral Care and Outreach – up, in and out. Two weeks on each.

Having had our two weeks on Worship, we come now to Pastoral Care.

This week we will look at some background issues. Next time in two weeks time, in part 2, (because it's Harvest next week) we will look at some practical application.

We saw last week that worship is something we do not only with our lips but with our lives.

Pastoral Care might possibly be described the other way round: not only with our lives, but with our lips. In other words pastoral care is also about action and speaking.

When we think about pastoral caring we probably think about the caring professions, the world of doctors, nurses, health care workers in the community, social workers and mental health practitioners.

When we think of them we might also think of bedside manner and call their a vocation perhaps rather than just a

job. In my previous parish one of my first churchwardens, Peter, was the local doctor. He had recently retired when we arrived ... but he always about his patients as people he looked after. Pastoral Care was what Peter was all about – and even in retirement it was hard to stop him visiting and calling in on people he knew were poorly or in need of an encouraging word.

Bedside manner though isn't always great:

The doctor says to the patient "I've got some good news and some bad news". "Oh dear", says the patient, "what's the bad news?" "The bad news is that we're going to have to amputate both your legs". "Crickey" says the patient, that's a bit of a shock. What's the good news?" "Well, the good news is ... that the chap in the next bed wants to buy your slippers!"

The doctor says to the patient "I've got some good news and some bad news". "Oh dear", says the patient, "what's the good news?" "The good news is that you've only got 24hrs to live". "Crickey" says the patient, that's a bit of a shock. How can that possibly be good news?" "Because", says the doctor, "the bad news is ... I should have told you yesterday!"

Pastoral Care ... My own call is rooted in this aspect of church life: love of God and love of people – always been interested in people and in what makes them tick. Known what it is to be cared for when, as a teenager, I was unwell. Known how valuable and important it is to show that you care for someone or for a situation. Caring really counts. I still sometimes see a card I wrote to a person on their

mantlepiece long after it arrived with them in the post – it means a lot and seeing it there encourages me to know that people know that they are cared for.

James says:

Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.

He is talking here about personal discipleship but he might also be setting out a framework for pastoral caring.

Gentleness – is a key characteristic. Gentleness means not going around like a bull in a china shop, not being insensitive when things are tricky, not putting your foot in it with the vulnerable, not disregarding people's sensibilities and finer feelings when they are in need or in trouble.

Seeing Jesus as a model for this is a good place to start. He always seemed to know just the right thing to do and to say when someone approached him asking for his help. He healed the lepers, he gave sight to the blind and deaf to those unable to hear, speech to those unable to utter a sound and even life to those who had died. Just the right touch for just the right situation and person. Jesus treated people with gentleness.

He also treated people with wisdom, knowing (sometimes supernaturally it seems) what their underlying need was. He did not always take them at face value. The presenting issue was not always the underlying cause of the problem. It's a bit like the man visiting the doctor who mentions the key

thing he went to talk about as he is almost out of the door on his way home.

Wisdom also means weighing up what you are being told. It might mean taking soundings from others about a person or a situation, finding out a bit of the background before you go blundering in.

Wisdom and common sense are closely allied – asking someone if you can pray for them before you just rush in with words they are not ready to hear; asking if someone would rather sit down than stand when you can see they look a bit wobbly. Offering options to consider rather than hard and fast solutions can be critically important so that the person you are caring for still has a sense of being in control and having a say in their own present reality and their future life ahead.

Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.

James goes on ... to describe and define this wisdom further

¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

What does it mean to be wisdom full of good fruits, without a trace of partiality ...

I think it means that your care is about the other person not about you. Good fruits is a way of describing the evidence of your caring, people might say that they are grateful to you

for what you have done, they might even write you a card or send you a special message. I have a special drawer at home where I put cards and letters from people I have helped in one way and another. When I am having a bad day I might go to this drawer and remind myself that at least one person was pleased with what I did for them.

Good fruits is your track record – which resonates with Paul says about the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These are the characteristics of Jesus lived out in us in our pastoral caring of others. People see him in us and remark on it. They are pleased when they do. It was almost like Jesus himself was visiting. It gave me such comfort to know that you were there bringing God into the situation.

Partiality is all about not having favourites. How important this is in families, in the classroom, in the office, and even in church. We know in some of the early family stories from the OT, that favouritism is a root of all kinds of shenanigans. That coat that Joseph got from his dad proved to be a really unhelpful addition to his wardrobe.

Some of the most painful things I have had to deal with in ministry is where your leadership trumps friendship. You make a decision based on an impartial assessment of the situation and someone takes great offence because they thought you were their friend and you would deal with them differently because of that. This is one of the costs of

pastoral ministry I think and one of things to look out for particularly – not least because just at a human level we do find some people easier to get on with than others, we do warm to some and not so much to others. Our pastoral dealing, though, has to set all that stuff aside and treat everyone with equal care and concern.

So, pastoral care involves gentleness, wisdom and even-handedness ...

James then explains something of the back story in terms of what is going on in the church to which he is writing. And we see that the problems there are rooted in selfishness ...

4 Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? ² You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet^[a] something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts.

Dispute and conflict seem to mark the life of the church James is writing to. It sounds like relationships are bad: there is envy and argument. This seems to come from the internal battle within all of us. James talks about this as: *your cravings that are at war within you.*

It's not always easy to see other people positively. To rejoice in someone else's success or praise their ability or skill or gift. Sometimes we only see their "whatever it is" as a reminder that we don't have it, or can't do it, even if we really wish we did have it or could do it.

Dispute and conflict are not godly things.

James goes on ...

⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

The devil has a field day when Christians are in dispute and conflict. It makes his day when we can't agree or fall out or get into lying about each other or treating each other badly or speaking about each other unkindly.

John was speaking about the armour of God the other week. This is not just a Sunday school picture for the children to colour in. It's real. The devil is real. His work is destructive and undermining of God's work in the world. If we submit to God (give ourselves wholly to him) and resist the devil, as James encourages us to do, he will flee. But we have to stand firm with our armour on.

Clearly, the church to which James is writing has problems in this area: he calls them to clean their hands (clean up their act – we might say), purify their hearts (sort out their inner motivations and attitudes - we might say) and stop being double-minded (saying one thing to the Rector and something quite different to everyone else – we might say).

Good pastoral care is a hallmark of a healthy growing church. It's good to know that church is a place where hurting people can find comfort, lonely people can find

welcome, poorly people can know that there are people to pray for them and with them. And that is a great kind of church family for us all to try to be.

We are well on this road here at St Andrew's, I think.

Next time, we will have a look at some of the ways we are conspicuously (but sometimes behind the scenes) doing some of these good things. I will celebrate with you some success stories and offer opportunities for us to consider where we might do more and be more.

We are looking to model the caring we see encouraged in the letter of James and modelled in the life and ministry of Jesus. And we look to do that in this community and for his greater glory. Let's pray ...