

Faith, Works and Favouritism

It is with some trepidation that an Arminian Methodist preacher stands in a Reformed pulpit to preach on the Epistle of James, described by Luther as an 'epistle of straw'. In fact the passage from James we had read to us seems to be at the very heart of Martin Luther's concern about salvation by works.

It would be lovely to spend the next 15 minutes or so rehearsing the great reformation debates about justification by faith alone and the rift within Protestantism between Calvinists and Arminians.

But I stand before you today as one who is learning to question the value of that sort of discourse. Don't get me wrong – I am not questioning the need for theology, nor even for a proper understanding of our history and traditions. I still want to claim the title 'theologian' because I believe in the necessity of the theological task in today's world. What I want to question is the MODE and LANGUAGE of much that passes for theology in the church today. Is the church still interested in fulfilling its vocation as a THEOLOGICAL COMMUNITY?

I ask these questions as someone who now looks on the church from a different vantage point. I spent five years in Circuit as a Methodist minister before moving into chaplaincy full-time in 2004. For the past two years I have been chaplain to two very different universities and London City YMCA. That transition from church-based ministry to chaplaincy was not an easy one, in fact it felt pretty lonely at times.

It felt as if I was moving from the very centre of the action, in church terms, to the periphery. That sort of shock to the system often leads to a deep questioning and so it was with me. It is still challenging me to rethink theology and ministry and it is that struggle I want to share with you this morning.

First a bit about the contexts in which I work. The YMCA is a well-known organisation – it even has its own song! It was founded by George Williams less than a mile from this chapel and now spans the globe. I wonder what comes to mind when you think of the YMCA? My impression, before going to work there, was of Christians running gyms! In fact, City YMCA houses hundreds of young homeless people each year, people who have left home because of abuse, or are refugees fleeing persecution in their own countries.

Some of the most vulnerable people in our society are looked after by the YMCA and yet, I dare say most of the local churches hardly know that it exists. The YMCA needs your prayers and a sense of connectedness. Do you consider the mission of your local YMCA to be part of YOUR mission?

It's certainly more than Christians running gyms...

Higher Education is a different matter. Since the end of the Second World War, universities have been changing. Successive governments have sought to expand and open the opportunities afforded by higher education to a wider audience. New universities were built in the 50s, polytechnics in the 60s and 70s, the Open University is still the largest in the UK, and the latest attempt to encourage up to half of 18-30 year olds to engage in higher study.

You will no doubt have your opinions about that policy, particularly if you work in a university. I think what is sometimes forgotten in the argument is that it is still only 50%! Half of 18-30 year olds will not go to university. I often wonder how many students from Islington Green School will end up at City University – nowhere near half I would guess.

Some argue that universities have moved from being ivory towers to becoming degree factories churning out ever more graduates. Yet, universities are still the places where most research goes on, research that informs and changes our lives. Did you know, for example, that the concept of 'food miles' was invented at City University?

In all of this expansion, our universities have become both international and multicultural communities. At City we now have students from 160 countries and from every major world religion.

It is from these contexts that I come to look at our readings this morning and the two issues they raise:

1. The first is FAVOURITISM, partiality, prejudice even. The writer of James condemns it, yet Jesus seems to be shown in the Gospel as showing favouritism. A great Methodist liturgical scholar was once asked why not more of Our Lord's CV was contained in the Creeds. Pointing to this story from Mark, he replied, 'What you mean like the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman where our Lord is shown to be a blatant racist?'

It would be controversial to suggest that Jesus is a racist in this story, but he certainly acting out of the thinking of his time and his community. For him, like his fellow Jews, God's grace comes to Israel first and foremost, and then 'spills' out to other nations after. This thinking is challenged more than once in the Gospels and Jesus finds himself confronted with the messiness of God's grace. It is in encounter that change is possible.

Encounter is at the very heart of what I do as a chaplain. It is the chance meeting which often seems random and yet which is grace-filled and leads to other things. It makes for a very untidy theology of grace, but it also leads me to ask if we have moved on from first-century thinking? What is our model of God's action in the world – that it is primarily in (and perhaps even, for) the Church, with the rest as an afterthought?

James challenges that idea completely in order to prepare his readers to be open to what God is actually doing. It is about allowing ourselves to be surprised again by grace.

2. The second issue from our readings is the thorny problem of FAITH AND WORKS.

I often receive criticism from colleague for not running chaplaincy like a little church, with services in a chapel for a congregation of willing students. And I admit that I take such things to heart and feel guilty. It is certainly much easier to be busy. You not only don't have time to think but you can try to make yourself popular or useful.

Many chaplains find the lack of things to do intolerable and either return to church work or become counsellors or advisors. I can see why they do. We live in a culture – esp in the church! – where usefulness equals worth. The more we are needed, the more valued we feel. If it were just a case of busyness, our churches would be full!

Busyness is not enough – faith, by which I mean purpose, reflection, vision, is also required. We need to overcome the age old dichotomy in the church between those who do and those who pray. From a chaplaincy perspective the gulf between words and actions is one of the greatest put-offs to religion.

What chaplaincy might teach the church is that we need to DO much less and REFLECT much more. We also need to learn to enjoy and live in the present moment, becoming attentive to people where they are. And I don't just mean to our members.

Barbara Glasson is a Methodist minister working in Liverpool. She was sent to a place without a church and told to minister. For a year she simply wandered through the city centre, listening to what was going on. She now meets in a room above a bookshop to make bread. The door steward is the local *Big Issue* seller, others come when they are ready. It's called *Somewhere Else* and offers a safer space for a whole spectrum of people.

CONCLUSION

The Gospel is like a virus, it can't live very long outside a human host. We, who claim to be part of a community formed by the Gospel, need to relearn the power of incarnation as a two-way process.

Yes, we preach the Gospel by living it day-by-day in loving relationships; but we also receive the Gospel through attentive listening to the lives of those around us.

Amen.