

Season of Creation: Faith and works

James 1:17-27

We have an interesting pair of New Testament readings today, in that on the surface they seem to contradict each other. In our Gospel reading, Jesus is having a go at the Pharisees for their legalism. On the other James reminds us that faith without works is dead (although that phrase doesn't appear until later in the book, we hear this same thought today). How do we deal with this? I think it is important to note these are two writings to two different contexts, each seeking to answer the same question in different ways: how do we live authentically as followers of the Way in our context?

The community to whom the Gospel was written lived in the late 60s at a time when there were few left who actually knew Jesus. It was important to write down the stories that had been shared before they were lost to history (and aren't we glad they did!). As more Gentiles joined the church, the question of whether or not they had to first be Jewish became more pressing. Did they have to follow the Torah in order to be counted among the faithful? This question was a hot debate that we see as an ongoing question in Paul's writing (hence the response about being justified by faith alone).

Setting aside the stereotypes of the Pharisees and the antisemitism that has arisen from this (it's important to name because it is part of our history), what we see in this is those who misused the Torah for their own purposes. Some of the verses that the lectionary skips over speaks of the practice of dedicating material items to the Temple (and then later undoing this) to get around the requirement to look after parents in their old age. Elder abuse is apparently not a new problem.

When we read this text in its whole context, we see that it is not so much the question of whether or not to take specific actions, but to consider the intentions behind those actions: are they done to show love of God and neighbour or are they done out of selfishness and self-interest?

This relates to the James reading. We heard: But be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. Having a faith calls out a response and this is shown most clearly, most emphatically in James. Whilst James does draw on common lists of virtues and vices to describe what this means, he also does what the Gospels show Jesus doing – considering what is right behaviour in its context rather than as absolutes.

What does this mean for Sustainable September and its theme “to hope and act with creation”? How are we called to affirm the goodness of God's creation and make a better future for the young people of today? The answer to this question is going to differ from person to person because of our contexts. However, I think that what both these passages is asking us to do is be honest with ourselves about how we respond to God's invitation to a fullness of life. Do we look at who we are, to use the metaphor in James, and honestly respond to God's love or do we go away making excuses about why we leave the work up to other people? What is it that we are called to do to hope and act with creation? Is a practical action that you can commit yourself to taking in the coming week or month to hope and act for creation?