

## **Us and them, the righteous and the wicked, faith and works**

Proverbs 22.1-2, 8-9, 22-23, Psalm 125 (p.361), James 2.1-17, Mark 7.24-37

Our Old Testament reading from Proverbs is about the differences that divide people. It might sound like a cliché but those who are not like us are different from us. Others might look different, sound different, live differently, or have different perspectives and priorities. Often that difference makes us at best cautious and at worst less than our best ourselves.

At our retreat we talked about change and some people shared changes in their lives and how the world and perhaps other people came to look very different to them. Can you give an example of seeing people in a different light? [Responses ... ]

Are we more willing to despise, dismiss or take advantage of those who are different from us? Or are we willing to listen and learn, to try to understand, and to help if we can with necessities like a secure income, food or clothing, shelter, work, education, healthcare. Some other necessities of life are mutual respect, a willingness to see through the eyes of those not like us and an openness to learning from them. It may be that the vulnerable have more to teach us and more ways to help us than we do to help them. Changing our hearts and minds can be more difficult than changing our physical circumstances.

Can we put ourselves on the side of the beloved of God who can make very little difference to their own resources or circumstances? Can we also be tolerant of those who seem to have much more than us and do not seem to notice their relative advantage? Considering our own position as the norm can blind us to much and rob us of much. Jesus made no such distinction. His friends and followers were high and low, rich and poor, sick and well, respected and greeted with suspicion. Can you identify some of these people? [Responses ... ]

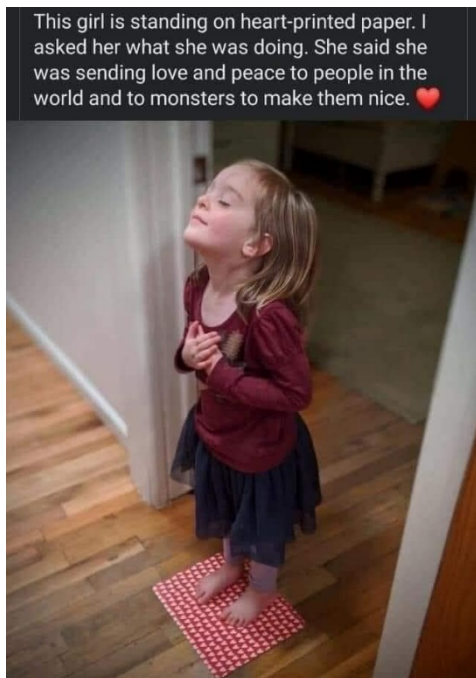
Jesus bids us cross these boundaries in our attitudes towards one another, to be one in Christ and children of the one true God. If we can do that, the world will look very different.

Our psalm is one of those very human psalms that tells us something about God but also something about ourselves and human nature. You

will have heard that anyone may be only an illness or a job loss away from homelessness. It is equally true that many may be only a bad decision or two away from a life we might despise in others as wickedness. Our psalm says that if wickedness holds sway, the righteous may also become wicked. Can we control the context of our lives? If we walk in a swamp, does mud stick?

Two things are asked of God in this psalm. The psalmist asks for the Lord to do good to those who do good and to lead evildoers away. This is how the psalmist sees the coming of peace to God's people.

However, it is a request that assumes we are the good and the evildoers are not us. It also asks God to do all the work and commits us to nothing but the asking and expecting. Nothing, it seems, is our responsibility. Asking God's help in this may be a good start but can also be an easy out, a temptation to avoid taking some responsibility and some action.



If goodness rather than wickedness were to hold sway, if that were the predominant context, then perhaps the wicked might become righteous. Instead of praying like the psalmist that the Lord will lead those with crooked ways away with the evildoers, might we not pray that God will lead them to walk with the righteous? If we walk in righteousness, not self-righteousness but genuine righteousness, seeking to follow Jesus as best we can, can we not invite others to walk in the light that lights our way?

We know that our best attempt at righteousness is patchy at best. The righteous may simply be those who are just trying as best they can. If we walk with the one who is the light of the world, we can invite others into that wonderful light. Remember our parish motto, "Walking together with Jesus to take his light into the world." If we can do that, then we are also working with God to bring peace to God's people.

I do acknowledge that it takes courage to stop saying, "Take them away, Lord" and to begin saying, "If you put them in my path Lord, help me to walk with them as you would wish."

James has more to say about favouritism, and then launches into that great and false debate about faith and works. If there is one of these things (either faith or works), would you not expect to see the other alongside it?

I recall Andrea preaching about being hearers of the Word and doers of the Word. Like the pedals of a bicycle, one without the other just doesn't work, no matter how well you do the one thing. The pendulum in a clock only works if it goes both ways. One way without the other is dysfunctional.

How did we get into his great debate about faith and works? Martin Luther was the greatest advocate of faith over works. This happened because he saw people using works as a substitute for faith and the works themselves were not always works that arose from and reflected faith. The most obvious example was seeking to buy the favour of people and of God. Someone's life might look dissolute and godless, but they might also give money to build a church to impress others, or pay the church for so-called indulgences to buy God's favour for themselves or others, rather than reforming the ways that led them to think they needed God's indulgence.

Luther saw no true faith behind these works, and he was right. Luther saw that the pendulum was not swinging towards faith, so he pushed it away from works and preached about the primacy of faith. Faith had been lost and needed to be found.

It is also possible to push the pendulum in the opposite direction as we can see in our reading from James. James saw people professing faith but there was no fruit of it in their lives. Faith is not just a private warm and cosy feeling. James declared that without the evidence of works, the faith professed was likely false. James, like Luther, was right. Where there is faith, we should also see some works of mercy as the fruit of that faith.

A famous man summed up it up when he said, "We may give without loving, but we cannot love without giving."

As on many issues, you can find Bible verses commending faith, and verses commending works that arise from that faith. It is like loving God and loving our neighbour. We need to do both. Sometimes we need more reminding about one than the other but that does not mean that we can ignore either one.

Does anyone remember the words of Reverend Canon Simon Wooldridge about saints and sinners inside and outside prison? [ ... Those inside needed reminding that they were saints, while those outside needed reminding that they were sinners.]

Us and them, the righteous and the wicked, faith and works, the in-crowd and the out-crowd. How do we stop building walls and start building bridges? How do we love God, and also those around us who don't seem to be on the same page? How do we love not just our neighbour but even our enemy?

One of the answers can be seen in today's Gospel reading. You know the story of the Syrophenician woman. She came to Jesus in her time of need. She did not offer money or sacrifice or repentance or promises to do better. She came with all her ethnic, social, cultural and religious differences, but she did not see them as barriers. She came very simply with her need and her faith that Jesus could and would help her. We see this same faith elsewhere in the healing of the centurion's servant and the Capernaum official's son.

We do not have to conform to someone else's idea of who is acceptable. We can come just as we are. We love knowing that. It follows that we should receive others just as they are. We don't always love knowing that.

Following Jesus means seeing, hearing, caring and acting. Not walking by on the other side, walking past and pretending not to see or hear but seeking to truly see, truly hear and truly respond as Jesus did with this woman, with the blind man, and with others who sought his help or healing or mercy or forgiveness or anything else.

Lord, help us to grow as followers of Jesus, so that our works of faith are not an add-on but an expression of our faith and a means to grow that faith as we seek to be more like Jesus. Amen.