

FAITH, DEEDS AND SOCIAL ACTION

Good evening. As you know, we are on the eve of a major initiative to find out the needs and aspirations of our community, with a view to appropriate action – meeting felt needs and helping to build the village community. I feel called to talk this evening on the biblical basis for such social action by the church, with particular reference to how our “faith” needs to be accompanied by such “deeds”. My prayer is that by providing some further biblical backing for our planned “deeds”, yet more impetus will be provided to the project itself – as well as other social actions we are involved with. (The talk is certainly also relevant to the Mozambique visit.)

Why is there any question about faith versus deeds? We must recall that the basis of our salvation is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. As stated in Ephesians 2:8-9 “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast.” Or in Romans 3:20-21 “no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known.... through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.” If a personal commitment to Christ is sufficient for salvation, as these passages suggest, and we cannot “work our way to heaven” then why should we not just sit in church and leave the rest of the world alone? Certainly, in the light of these texts, there has been a tension at times between faith, works and social action. I would mainly like to talk about the way the issue is addressed in James, which I think will get us on the right track.

I love the book of James. As most of you know, the James who wrote this epistle was probably the brother of Jesus, born a natural son of Mary and Joseph. In Jesus’ time of ministry James opposed him, and even went with his mother and brothers to try to withdraw Jesus from his ministry by force. But after the Resurrection he became a believer, and indeed Jesus appeared to him before his Ascension. He was the leader of the church in Jerusalem till he was martyred in AD 62 by being hurled from the pinnacle of the temple – the very pinnacle where the devil tempted Jesus. What a knowledge he must have had – seeing the Lord growing up to become a man! And what a fund of wisdom there is in his book! He teaches about patiently undergoing trials, keeping a tight rein on the tongue, what happens to a church where faith fails and the power of prayer. But let me focus on faith and deeds.

The principal passage to which I refer is James 2:14-26. Let us start off with 2:14-17: “What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”

This passage has been much misunderstood, not least by Luther who concluded that James was an “epistle of straw” owing to the seeming contradiction with Paul. But what James is saying is not that deeds are the way to win salvation. Rather, he is saying that if professed faith is not accompanied by good works showing commitment to Christ – a noticeable effect on the way we live - then the faith itself may be hollow. Deeds are evidence of faith. His example is a telling one – we see a fellow church member in dire need but voice a mealy-mouthed blessing without that substantial help we could provide. Sympathetic attitudes alone are not enough. While the example seems an obvious one, is it not the case that we may, in Stott’s words “prattle, plan and pray” while real need is ignored? Stott tells us of a homeless woman whom a parish priest promised to pray for as a brush-off, and who wrote the following poem:

“I was hungry and you formed a humanities group to discuss my hunger
I was imprisoned and you crept off quietly to your chapel and prayed for my release
I was naked and in your mind you debated the morality of my appearance
I was sick and you knelt and thanked God for your health
I was homeless and you preached to me of the spiritual shelter of the love of your God
I was lonely and you left me alone to pray for me
You seem so holy, so close to God – but I am still very hungry and lonely and cold”

Jesus himself of course teaches the same lesson as James – that faith and love must go together – in the parable of the sheep and goats on the Day of Judgement. In Matthew 25:35-36 he said “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” – and how did we serve him - by doing the same to a fellow human being in need, thus showing our true faith. Woe betide that we be among the goats!

Even Paul acknowledges that faith is only part of the story – good works are its fruit. The Ephesians passage on faith goes on to state in 2:10 “For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” He is highlighting a crucial distinction – that James would also acknowledge - between works in obedience to the Law of Moses as a means to gain salvation without faith (2:8-9), and good deeds wrought as fruits of belief in Jesus Christ (2:10).

James goes on to make a telling point in 2:18-19. “But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that--and shudder.” What good company we are in if we have faith in God without doing anything about it! James might have witnessed some of Jesus’ casting out of demons in the synagogues, where as in Luke 4:34 the demon cried ““Ha! What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are--the Holy One of God!”” Demons were among the first to perceive Jesus’ true nature. But of course despite their correct grasp of theology, they were unwilling to act on this perception! The faith of demons is just the hatred of God and fear of eternal punishment that is in wait for them.

James goes on to give us two examples of how true faith was shown by deeds in 2:20-26 – Abraham and Rahab. “You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.”

A number of points can be made here. Abraham in particular did not just undertake any deeds that came into his head, but rather those he was prompted by God to do, even as we are prompted by God to help our community. The deed itself was one that was very painful to him, and while the scale will not be comparable, we too may be called out of our comfort zones for others’ benefit. But again the deed itself did not save him, as his belief in God had already been “credited to him as righteousness” even before Isaac was born. Meanwhile

Rahab despite her “unscriptural” occupation is in the pantheon of biblical heroines for her actions in helping the needy, the fruit of her faith.

Elsewhere in James we see further encouragement to social action. In 1:27 he says; “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress.” Again as in the parable of sheep and goats we are bidden to look after the unfortunate ones in society, with no hope of material gain for ourselves. Rather, by doing so we are following God’s will – his heart for the powerless - out of love and gratitude for our salvation. Or as James puts it in 3:13 we must carry out “deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.” There remain rich promises of spiritual reward for obedience to the word of God, as stated in James 1:25 “the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it--he will be blessed in what he does”.

Another useful lesson for our deeds is at the start of Chapter 2 in verses 2-4. This is to avoid prejudice. James gives the specific example of a church, which barely tolerates poor members but fawns over the rich: “Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "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?”

In the same way we must show mercy and treat people equally in our concern – for our social action will inevitably involve aiding those from another class or culture. I think we must equally not be prejudiced against non-believers. While some of James’ examples apply to church discipline, it is clear from 3:9 that he saw all men as a divine creation “made in God’s likeness”. Such a high view of the worth of man must encourage us to serve them. And indeed in 2:8 James reiterates the royal law that has the same implication: Jesus’ command to "Love your neighbour as yourself", showing mercy ourselves in response to God’s mercy to us. Or indeed Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan. How much more powerful an incentive this should be for social action than secular humanists, who would justify deeds by the nebulous “future potential of the human race as evolution proceeds”.

There could possibly be a modern twist. Whereas it may be obvious today who is poor and needy in physical terms we must not assume that the better off are without needs. Needs can be emotional as well as physical. Living in palatial Pembury houses may not be sufficient to protect the better off from a sense of isolation and depression, to which we should be sensitive. God designed mankind to live in a community – and for many this is lacking.

In our social action we also need to be sensitive to injustice and oppose any that we find. James in 5:4 highlights the social injustice committed by the rich people of his day, “Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty.” This passage echoes the words of Amos and Hosea in the Old Testament. It also recalls God’s perpetual concern for justice as in Psalm 146 “He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets prisoners free, the Lord gives sight to the blind, the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down”. Today James might inveigh against neglect by local and national government agencies, regulations that trap people in poverty by withdrawing benefit as they work, those in painful waits for hospital places and divorced husbands refusing maintenance for wives and children, to name but a few. He might also criticise us, who are rich in faith and generally also in possessions, if we do not act to assist others physically, emotionally and spiritually.

James of course is not the only section of the New Testament that proclaims the need for social action. In Peter's speech to Cornelius in Acts 10:38 he reminds us that Jesus did not merely teach and preach but "went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil". 1 John tells us in 3:17-18 "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth" And Paul in Titus 2:14 "Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good." And in Galatians 5:6 "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love".

With all this teaching as background, as John Stott puts it "it is exceedingly strange that any followers of Jesus Christ should ever have needed to ask whether social involvement was their concern". Social action was evidently second nature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the wake of the great evangelical revival led by Wesley, when by pressing for reform the likes of Wilberforce and Shaftesbury transformed the social conditions of the poor and enslaved, while an army of Christian philanthropists worked also to improve their lot.

Stott suggests that momentum was lost after the First World War. Factors underlying the "great reversal" are worth recounting since a number of them may still have resonance today. In particular Stott cites, first, the fight against theological liberalism (itself often with a social aspect) which led evangelicals to focus solely on bible teaching and not also on social action. Second, there was the idea that the oncoming millennium means social decline was inevitable and should not even be resisted, since Christ would put it right on his return. Third, there was the increasing predominance of the middle class in the church who were focused on their own salvation, and indifferent to inequality and injustice.

As a consequence of these, the twentieth century church in both Britain and America was often guilty of escaping from the world rather than engaging with it. Again James has a powerful and relevant text for this syndrome in 1:22-24 "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like." Like someone who sees but ignores undone buttons in the mirror, the church has often heard the word but not acted on it. Not that James would condone the liberals either, who risk by too much engagement to dilute the gospel, thus failing to "keep oneself from being polluted by the world". Did James not warn in 4:4 that "don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God."

Jesus clearly did not intend that his church would either escape from the world, on the one hand, nor become contaminated by it, on the other. Holiness and worldliness have to be combined as in Matthew 5:13-16 "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." For the church to do his bidding the salt needs to soak into the meat and the light shine in the darkness, and Christians must be active in non-Christian society.

This leads to one final point, the relation of social action to evangelism. Jesus' great commission in Mark 16:15 was of course to "Go into all the world and preach the good news

to all creation” – to provide spiritual support. But we have argued that the Bible – and Jesus himself – also mandate social action – physical and emotional support. How should they combine? One possibility would be to see social action as solely a means to evangelism. But this is surely not sufficient in the light of the status of all humanity in God’s eyes, the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles. A second is to see them as substitutes – but this is precisely the error that those choosing holiness or worldliness made. We would maintain that they are complements or partners, and both are warranted as ends in themselves in the light of the teaching we have discussed today.

To conclude, we have maintained that faith and deeds share an essential unity. The church needs to be both holy and in the world, and we are individually called to deeds of social action as well as evangelism. Stott reminds us that the Catholic name for communion, the Mass is so named from the Latin rite “ite missa est”. This is to be translated as “now you are dismissed” in polite English but could more colloquially be just “get out” into the world that God made, and into which Christ came and to which he sends us to serve others. Let us go out and do so!

Although it is scary to go out in the world to serve, the marvellous thing is that we don’t do it in our own strength but with God’s spirit, as he promised in Isaiah 61:1 “The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners