

Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity 2021

(29.08.2021)

James 1: 17 – end; Mark 7: 1 – 8, 14, 15, 21 – 23

There is an obvious connection between our two bible readings this morning: they're both about walking the walk, not just talking the talk. It's put most bluntly in the Letter of James, the first reading. We've heard it read: "[B]e doers of the word, and not merely hearers . . . Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

That obviously resonates with us today. There can't be anyone, whether prompted by their Christian faith or just out of sheer common decency, whose heart doesn't go out to the people we've seen this week trying to escape from Afghanistan. And if our faith doesn't prompt us to ask what we can possibly do to assist people in such obviously desperate conditions, then, really, what is our faith worth?

So let's first of all just consider what we in Bridlington can do, to be doers of the word rather merely hearers, and what the limitations are on what we can do. So far, I'm not aware of any Afghan refugees being settled in Bridlington. However, some Afghan refugees have already been placed in Scarborough. About ten days ago the Rainbow Centre in Scarborough, which is based in the parish hall for St.Mary's Parish Church up on top of the Old Town, were operating a distribution centre of the basic things these people needed. They were asking for donations of stuff, and in particular asking women's and children's clothes.

People in Bridlington were asking how they could get things up to Scarborough; and this time last week we were frantically making arrangements for the Priory to be a Bridlington hub for people to bring things here and for us to take them up to there. However, this operation has been a victim of its own success. The plight of the people at Kabul airport has so touched people's hearts that the Rainbow Centre has been overwhelmed with

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donations. They now can't cope with all the stuff they've been given and therefore, for the moment, we're on hold. It's a question of "watch this space" and we'll let you know when we can begin to do our bit.

Of course, doing our bit, for Christians, is more than an expression of common decency. It's one of the ways we seek to be doers of the word; one of the ways we engage in the mission God is calling us into. There are other ways we do that as well. The Anglican Communion, of which the Church of England is a part, has identified five marks of mission. Tending to people's needs is one of them, so if we're helping create a welcoming environment to people escaping from Afghanistan, we're undoubtedly applying our faith in mission.

But we need to do a rain check and ensure that we're not just being carried along on a popular wave of sentimentality, no matter how real and urgent the need is. We need to ensure that our urge to tend people's

needs is balanced by our engagement with the other marks of mission.

There are five marks of mission, and recently they've all been described with words beginning with T to make them easy to remember. There's Tell, Teach, Tend, Transform and Treasure. We're not being faithful to our calling if we don't use every opportunity to tell people the good News of Jesus; that Jesus lived for us and died for us and rose again for us. We're not being faithful if we don't teach people in the faith; if we don't ensure that have a well-grounded, mature faith; if we don't ensure they know how to read the Bible, are proficient in techniques of prayer and have a good, working grasp of the fundamental principles of Christian theology.

If we don't tell and teach, then whatever else we may do is just so much do-gooding and isn't distinctively Christian. But we mustn't be content with telling and teaching. We mustn't be seduced into sitting in our churches or our Bible study groups talking about Jesus,

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but never going out and applying what we've been talking about.

So we must go out and transform and treasure as well. We transform society by challenging unjust structures at whatever level we find them. And we treasure God's creation by tackling climate change and promoting the sustainability of our natural environment. And of course the two are interconnected because we perpetuate injustice by failing to tackle climate change. The poor are disproportionately affected by climate change. It is the poor who are the victims of extreme weather events. It is the poor whose land is devastated in to dust bowls by deforestation. And it is the poor who are forced to migrate in numbers and conditions that make our hearts bleed.

But if we are just bleeding hearts who respond to need when it arises, no matter how necessary and right and proper that might be, we are best just salving our consciences and, worse, being complicit in perpetuating

the very injustices which create the crises in the first place. We run the risk of making these crises work. If there are do-gooders who will run themselves ragged feeding and clothing people every time they arrive thousands of miles from home with only the clothes they're standing up in, then that's a system that works. So tending to need is necessary, but it is never enough, and if it's all we do it's dangerously naïve.

If we just respond to need, we're going through the motions, making ourselves feel good, making ourselves look good, without engaging in the issues. We're like the people in Mark's Gospel who honour God with their lips but their hearts are far from him. The Pharisees and the scribes get a bad press in the Bible. But I'm increasingly clear that they were not bad people: they were just deluded people. They were deluded that their righteousness and their charity was enough. We must not delude ourselves that collecting second hand clothes for Afghan refugees is enough.

Amen.