

James 4:1-12

It pains me to say this but I do miss listening to Terry Wogan on Radio 2! I used to enjoy his humour and one of the phrases he often used was, “me, me, me, me!”

It is a phrase which I think is at the heart of what God has to say to us through James this morning.

At the end of last week’s passage we saw a comparison between two ways of thinking and living.

1. James 3:15-16 is the “me, me” thinking which James describes as earthly, that is human, focused on selfish ambition and which leads to disharmony and evil

2. The other, James 3:17-18 is relying on wisdom from God which creates harmony and goodness.

Clearly God would have us rely on his wisdom but unfortunately we don’t as James goes on to show.

So in the light of this James asks us these two questions in v1, “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you?”

He asked what caused fights and then the rhetorical question as the answer, surely it is the desires in you isn’t it?

There is no doubt that in our world today there are fights at so many levels. We see it at the international level with the squabbles over the ways to deal with the problems of the Euro, we see it at a national level with the bitter fighting in Syria, we see it in our own parliament at Prime minister’s question time over what kind of inquiry to have over the banks and the fixing of the libor lending rate. We see it in the work place as people tread over each other to climb the ladder. We see it in the home between adults and also between siblings. I remember well that there used to be a little note on the pin board in our kitchen which on one side said “Anna” and the other “Philip” and it was about whose turn it was to have the skin off the top of the custard just to avoid an argument! We also sadly see it in the wider church and in individual churches as people seek to exert their authority or to get things done their way.

There is strife and quarrels aplenty but what causes them? Well James is clear “your desires that battle within you”. Now that could mean my desires clashing with yours and certainly self or “me, me, me, me” is at the bottom of every human conflict, but also it could refer to the battle that at times goes on within us as we wrestle with good and evil. You know the battle so often depicted with the angel on one shoulder and the little devil on the other. The Apostle Paul spoke about this battle between good and evil and in honesty said, “For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.” (Rom 7:19)

James was writing to these Christians who like us knew that kind of battle, a battle within them because they like us live in the real world which has its effect on us. It produces a double-mindedness which James refers to a number of times where God’s wisdom and human wisdom does battle within our minds and hearts.

Some years back my friend Matthew and I rowed down the River Thames from Lechlade to Richmond. I very well remember one day we got to Abingdon and decide to have a break so we pulled up to some moorings but they were above the boat. Matthew pulled himself up onto the bank and thinking he had hold of the ropes tightly I started to do the same only the boat went away from the bank and I was dumped unceremoniously into the water.

In a sense that is what James and Paul were speaking of, the fact that we can't as it were live by two different ways God's and the world's. That way, this double-minded way, is fraught with problems. However, for many that is not the issue because many of us reject God's word and God's thinking. We humans think we are wise. We think we know how to live and we happily play "I did it my way" at our funerals to prove it!

However, in these verses and in our lives we can see the results of what happens when we pursue our own agenda and our own desires and when we rebel against God by ignoring him and his wisdom.

In case we are in any doubts James spells out some of the results for us.

a. spoiled relations with people, v1-2 & 11-12

Our actions spoil relationships as we battle with each other. When two people each seeking to fulfil their own ambitions come together there will be disputes at whatever level be it in the home at work or internationally. Then in v11-12 we see how our words spoil relationships as we speak against others. It has been fascinating following some of the Leveson inquiry into press standards and to hear how apparently politicians we fearful of getting on the wrong side of the Murdochs in case they rubbished them in the press. When I follow my desires fuelled by human wisdom then it can so easily end in spoiled relations with other people.

b. spoiled relationship with God v3-4

in v4 God uses very strong words calling them "adulterous" that is they have opted out of a relationship with him into a different relationship. Human wisdom will always take us away from God and assert us as God in our lives instead. We become God and we rule our own lives. God becomes relegated to little or nothing. I have often heard people say "I like to think of God like this" as if they are wise because they can tell me what God is like. But God has told us what he is like in his word and he has shown us in Jesus.

If I mention the name Bob Diamond you may have some thoughts about the guy, either about the £120 million he earned from Barclays in seven years or about his part in the lending rate scandal and if we are honest that view comes from the press. The world will tell me what to think about him. However, if I were to talk with him, perhaps to read his autobiography if he has written one I might get a different picture. God has told us what he is like but if we ignore that and follow our way and our thinking it spoils our relationship with God.

c. It also causes pain to God v5.

God's spirit in us is affected when we ignore God and turn away from him and God yearns for us to return and grieves over us.

Jacques and Anique why did you have a baby? After all he will disobey you. As he grows up he'll go off with his friends and not give a thought to you and how you might be feeling. He won't ring text or email and if you don't believe me ask any parent here about the heartache that children cause their parents.

Now of course there is great joy and I am sure in many ways Jean-Luc will be a great blessing to you but the point I am making is that in the same way that we children cause heartache to our earthly parents so we cause grief to our heavenly father when we live our lives without any reference to him.

Our selfish ambitions – living life my way without reference to God is the cause of spoiled relations with people and with God. Needless to say this is not what God wants and it is why he gave us this letter through James because, as we saw last week, the main thread is that the readers should be living a life of faith which is tested in the fire of trials and shown to be real in practice.

However most of us are a long way from that and most of us are in some ways or another living self focussed lives. So what does God want us to do about it?

d. five steps to take V6-10

Well in v7-10 James mentions five things and I am going to take them in the reverse order.

i) humble yourselves

that is recognise that "my way" isn't the best. Recognise you and I haven't all the answers. Recognise that there is a better way. Now that is not easy because from an early age we are brought up to stand on our own two feet, to be independent and so to admit that we need help to get the most out of life is indeed a humbling thing. We all know that men don't ask for directions. We get lost in the car and clearly there is something wrong with the map but ask someone directions – no way! So to suggest that both men and women ask God to help direct their way is humbling indeed.

ii) grieve, mourn and wail

that is be sad for all the things that you have done wrong and above all for ignoring God his will and wisdom. This is what the Bible calls repentance, being sorry for where we have gone wrong with a desire to change.

iii) wash your hands

the baptism we have just had for little Jean-Luc is full of imagery including that of washing. Going under the water is symbolic of the washing away of sin. The Psalmist in Psalm 24:3-4 asked, "Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place?" and then gave the answer "He who has clean hands and a pure heart." Here the encouragement to these readers of the letter was

to wash their hands and purify their hearts. But how did James imagine they or we could do that? I mean every new year we make resolutions and very quickly we break them. There is no way we can purify our hearts so that our hands that is our actions and our words are also pure. However, what we can't do God has done in Jesus. Through his death we can be forgiven, that is washed clean, all our sins forgiven and then, through the power of the Holy Spirit in us, we can have God's power to live his way. Yes we won't be perfect this side of heaven but through Christ we are made clean and so acceptable to our heavenly Father. This is humbling because we have to accept this as a gift from God. It is not something we can do ourselves.

iv) Come near to God

So today if you are aware that you have not been living the way God wants you to then God's message to us is to come to him. It may be the first time or it may be for the 1000th time but come. Come in humility, come with sadness for your sin, come and ask his forgiveness through Jesus. Come with confidence that, as it says in v6, "he will come near to you" that is he will accept you. If we come to God asking his forgiveness through Jesus then God will not turn us away. That is his promise.

v) Submit

that is ask God to take his rightful place in your life as God.

What God is showing us here through James is that there are two ways we can live our life.

One we can reject God and his right to rule in our lives and try and live our life our own way but as we have seen that leads to selfish ambitions which spoil our relationship with people and God and ultimately brings us under God's judgement.

Two we can submit to God as our ruler and through Jesus know God the Father's forgiveness and our reinstating as children of God.

Which way do you want to live? That was the question James was asking these readers and God is asking each of us today?

For some here it may be the first time that this question has been put to us in this way for others of us we have heard it many times but for all the question is there to be answered – which way will we live this week? Certainly James would encourage us not to be double –minded about this, not to imagine we can have a foot in each camp. His encouragement would be for us to submit to God and allow him to rule in our lives in each new day.