

Year B, Creation 2, Proper 23, 8th September 2024

Isaiah 35:4-7a. James 2: 1-17. Mark 7: 24-37

It may come as no surprise to you that I like the Epistle of James. He has a very pragmatic approach to faith. He sets this out clearly in his letter.

He says that faith if not accompanied by action, is dead. For faith to live in us, James is clear that it must have an impact on our behaviours and change us for the better. In particular, it should affect how we treat those in need.

And James means practical ways to treat those in need, not solely offering a prayer or a blessing. The example in the epistle is of someone who is without daily food. He means not just without food for that day, but for many days. So, in today's world James would be saying that a one-off purchase of a sandwich or soup, or handing over a fiver isn't really sufficient.

James is pointing us to a different way of thinking and acting. He is pointing us towards bigger thoughts and actions, the sort of actions that make us enquire about the causes of need, so that the hungry person no longer is daily at risk of hunger.

This example of a hungry person will normally lead us to think about homeless people asking for money and about people needing to use food banks to supplement their spend on food, utility bills and rent or mortgages.

As we are in the season of creation, maybe we can also think more widely, geographically speaking, to consider the person starving because climate change has meant their crops were scorched by the hot sun or washed away by intense downpours of rain. Or someone whose house was lost in a fire.

In response to climate change we may change some of our behaviours, to use less energy that emits greenhouse gases, improve the insulation of our houses, grow more of our own food, to use refillable containers, etc. But would we consider finding a way to protest about the slow progress towards net zero, as we know it would make energy cheaper in the long run and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. And we know it would reduce the stress and suffering of people in other parts of the world affected by climate change already as well as those starting to feel its affects. Does the word 'protest' cause you concern? What

does it look like to you? Is it writing a letter to your MSP and or MP? Is it joining a peaceful walk of protest? Or is any of this beyond what you would do?

When does our personal response to the starving person cross the line from being about our own individual behaviours and when does it become more strategic, trying to change things at regional, national or international levels?

Would you say an individual change you make is faith-based but trying to influence regional, national or international policies and rules and regulations is no longer inspired by your faith?

For you, is there a point on the continuum from individual response about a hungry person or hungry people to asking for changes to policy at the national level where it is no longer faith-based? Would you call it 'political' action, not faith-based action? Augustine developed his thinking and drew a distinction between our personal spiritual 'inner kingdom' and politics. Luther also followed this by calling it the 'two kingdoms' doctrine. However, Jurgen Moltmann, in his book, 'The Trinity and the Kingdom of God' critiqued this separation as an abuse of theology. The Roman Catholic theologian, Johann Metz, was equally critical of creating a boundary between individual and political theology. Metz was clear that political theology emphasises that all the New Testament promises of the kingdom; freedom, peace, justice, reconciliation, etc., cannot be made private affairs, cannot be entirely interiorised and spiritualised as an individual's longing for freedom and peace.

Jesus frequently called for changes to be made to unjust systems that were part of the religious, civil and of the occupying powers ways of operating. Jesus was in moral conflict with the religious and political leaders of his society. The church is an institution within our society charged with critical liberating tasks: concern for the individual, especially the poor and those who suffer injustice, as well as love expressed in social terms by bringing peace and justice to all, including calling for societal changes to achieve this peace and justice.

The word political is derived from a Greek word describing the democratic principle of the people of the city debating ideas and rules and deciding how to govern better. Jesus was operating in that same way by seeking a peaceful revolution amongst the people, where they would treat each other so differently, bringing peace to all, and ushering heaven down to earth. Jesus, I contend, was therefore political with a small 'p'.

As a member of the Iona Community, I commit to the four rules members follow. The second of the four rules states,

*“Working for justice and peace, wholeness and reconciliation in our localities, society and the whole of creation.”*

As part of this I commit, amongst other things, to:

*“engage with forms of political witness and action, prayerfully and thoughtfully, to promote just and peaceful social, political and economic structures” and “act in solidarity with the victims of environmental injustice throughout the world, and support political and structural change in our own countries to reduce our over-consumption of resources”.*

That gives you an indication of where I stand, and I am sure that isn't a surprise to any of you.

So, let's have a quick conversation about our responses to climate change and the suffering and loss of lives it is causing, and explore where we sit in relation to our approach as people of faith. Are our actions to be individual and personal, inspired by our faith, or do they reach beyond that to faith-based actions that are aimed at changing systems that are deemed to be part of political theology.

Do you consider such actions to be beyond what Jesus calls us to do, and are not based on our faith?

Are you more aligned to Augustine and Luther, or to Metz and Moltmann?