

This is the third in our series of sermons on the letter of James. As you heard in our reading we are at the end of chapter 1, and as we have done in the study groups I'm going to start this morning by reading the two verses I want to concentrate on from a different translation – this time I am reading from The Message. “Anyone who sets himself up as “religious” by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world.”

And the title of my sermon this morning is “religion is not a dirty word”.

Will you pray with me.

I was at a Bishop's study day last Tuesday and it went under the title of 'Equipped to Serve'. Of the three speakers, all whom I must say were very interesting and very encouraging, it is what the first speaker shared with us that I want to start this sermon by referring to.

The speaker was talking about a survey commissioned by an organisation called talk Jesus, and it gave us a fascinating picture of how people who say they are not Christians see us Christians.

Overall, in identifying the proportion of the population who see themselves as Christians, at least to some extent, they came up with a similar outcome to the recent national census – 48% of the population identified themselves as Christian – but the detailed split is one that we can more easily identify with. Just 6% of the population identify themselves as practicing Christians, whereas 42% identify themselves as non-practicing Christians – the other 52% identify themselves as non-Christians. By the way the definition of a practicing Christian is attending church once a month or more, and praying and reading the bible at least weekly. I think when you do maths for our villages, that 6% figure feels about right.

But I want to use some of the results of this survey as a way into looking at what James says about religion and being religious. You know people outside the church often use the word religious to describe themselves, or someone else, in comparison to those of us who are in the church – ‘Well, I'm not, or he or she is or was not, religious’, is a phrase I often hear, the implication being that I am religious, whatever that means. But then religion is a word we often don't really like – religion, or religious tends to have something of a negative feel about it. Would it surprise you to know that the words religious or religion are only used two or three times in the bible (depending on the translation you are looking at) outside of this passage: in Acts and in Paul's letter to the Galatians we find Paul talking about his role as a Pharisee in the Jewish religion. So I want us to consider how people see us when they describe us as religious, and I want to see how that can, or should, tie in with what James says about being religious.

One of the questions asked in this survey was asked to non-Christians who know a practicing Christian, and they were asked what they think about us practicing Christians. The top answer, 62%, described us a friendly, closely followed by Caring, Good-humoured and generous.

The most negative traits were narrow-minded, naïve and hypocritical – but the biggest response on those negative traits was only 10%. So, overall, I think we can be pleased by how we are

seen by non-Christians. What is not so good is when this same group of non-Christians were asked, "what do you think about the church?" Again friendly and caring were the top positive answers, but only by 20% and 22% of respondents respectively, and 26% of people described the church as hypocritical and the same number described the church as narrow minded – and the next biggest response, either positive or negative, was 16% of people who described the church as homophobic.

We, as individuals, are seen positively, but when we come together as a church, we are seen much more negatively. I'm going to come back to this in a minute to talk about what we can do to start addressing that, but first, rather than leaving the survey at a negative point, there was another question which I think we should find encouraging. Our group of non-Christians were asked, "Where would you go to find out about the Christian faith?" I'm not sure it would surprise anyone these days to hear that the top answer, just over a quarter of those responding, said Google, but the next two most popular answers, both at 22%, were going to a local church, and reading the bible. So we as a church do have a really important role in spreading the gospel, and you might also like to know, or you might be slightly scared by this, that the next most popular answer to the question, "Where would you go to find out about the Christian faith?", was talking to a friend or a family member who I know is a Christian.

So let's go back to James and see what he is saying. Real religion, says James, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world. Now, I am passionate about reading the bible in context, and I happen to think that if James was writing this today, he would have changed the emphasis in this sentence. The translation that you heard read earlier referred to looking after Widows and Orphans – they were, in Jesus' time, the needy group of society. By and large women didn't earn a living, and if their husbands died they, and their children, needed caring for – and what James is saying is that you, the early church, are responsible for doing just that. If James were with us today I think he would look at the church and say, "Yes of course you could do so much more, but actually caring for the homeless and the loveless, is something you, the church, play an enormous role in doing – so keep up the good work." I don't want to boast on behalf of the church but so much caring for the homeless and the loveless was started by the church, and perhaps that is not what James would focus on today when teaching us about discipleship – about being religious. So what would he?

"Anyone who sets himself up as religious by talking a good game is self deceived." How do other translations put this phrase? "If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless." "if you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless."

Yes James is particularly talking about being careful what you say to people – and he comes back to this topic later in the letter in more detail, and I'm sure we will come back to this in our sermons, but I think if James was here today he would say it is how you live your whole life that

is important, and more than that, where Jesus is in your life, that is the most important thing – and it is Jesus being the centre of your life which determines how “religious” you are.

Let me try and bring a few things I have said together. When people say that they are not religious, is not what they are really saying, “I don’t go to church because I don’t see the need to.” When non-Christians describe practicing Christians, yes they say we are nice friendly people, but I didn’t see Jesus mentioned in those responses very much. And when non-Christians see us nice Christians joined together as a church, I think that is what those non-Christians see as religion, and they don’t want to know, because they have negative vibes about the church.

And we have to change that. And the only thing we can do to change that is to make sure that people who do have contact with the church, see that Jesus is at the centre of our lives, he is at the centre of everything we do as a church, one of the reasons that we are helpful caring people is that our lives are driven by what Jesus teaches us through the bible, through our prayers, through our worship, and that is to be helpful, caring people. We must make it clear that the reason for the church’s very existence is not just to do good deeds but to learn about Jesus and to spread the Good News about Jesus to everyone else in our village. That’s not talking a good game – that is talking Jesus’ game.

Yes we must guard our tongues but we must not be afraid to use our tongues to tell people about Jesus.

Yes, we live in a worryingly godless world, and we must guard against the corruption of that worryingly largely godless world, and we must keep ourselves unstained by that world. There was apparently a series of adverts for a washing powder of some type a while ago that focussed on a dirty spot on an item of clothing – and without that washing powder that dirty spot grew and grew. I finish with that picture. A dirty spot, uncontrolled, growing across a piece of clothing. Can we stop that? Can we be the washing powder? Can we transform this worryingly largely godless world? Because to do so will require us to say, this is our religion. This is why we are religious. And we are proud of it. And your lives could be transformed by joining us.

Amen.