

Patience, prayer and praise

At the start of September this year, I commented on the aptness of looking at the letter of James, given that at the end of the month, today, we would be baptising our own James. And we celebrate that together. Praise God. Hallelujah.

Of course, James has been a part of this congregation since his birth. He was here before I was!

It's not that James has now been here long enough, or that James has done anything "earn" his baptism, and neither have his parents or godparents. If you think back to his baptism earlier this morning, before I baptised him, I asked some questions just to check that everyone was clear on the faith into which he was being baptised. Do you believe in God? Do you believe in Jesus Christ? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit? And so on.

In the Uniting Church in Australia, when we baptise children, as we have done this morning, we usually have the baptism early in the service – and while there may be some practical reasons for that as well, it emphasises the grace of God; and hearing the scriptures and the sermon come afterward.

And it was only after James was baptised that I turned to his parents, his godparents, and then everyone and asked that you all respond to God's grace, by making some commitments.

Those commitments came after James was baptised. You could have all upped and left the moment after I said "James, I baptise you In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit", and James would have been no less baptised.

As I said, baptism isn't earned. Not by James, not by any of us. It is God's free gift to his people.

We welcome James today, as we welcomed him into the church when he was born and have welcomed him in church in the years between. And as we've done that, and as we continue to do that, we follow Jesus' instruction that we heard in our gospel reading today "...Jesus called the Twelve and said, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all."" And then heard that "[Jesus] took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.""

Of course, Jesus also told us what would happen if we failed to welcome children: "If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea." Yikes.

I'm really glad we've welcomed James today – I'm not a fan of swimming in the sea at the best of times!

The last part of our baptism liturgy today was us all making a commitment. We said, "With God's help, we will live out our baptism as a loving community in Christ; nurturing one another in faith, upholding one another in prayer, and encouraging one another in service, until Christ comes."

While that is something we always say in baptism services, if you stop and think about it, they're pretty serious commitments: We're going to be a loving community, nurture each other, pray for each other, and encourage and serve one another. And we're going to do that for how long?

Until Christ returns. When is that? No one knows, but we know that Christians have been waiting for Jesus' return for the best part of two thousand years.

So James (James the brother of Jesus, not our own James) says, as we turn to our epistle reading today, “Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains.”

I take three things from that: That we need to be patient. That James is absolutely sure that Jesus will come back. And that his return will be a good thing.

Just like a farmer waits expectantly for his crop, we need to wait expectantly for Jesus. And we must wait patiently, living our lives of love and nurture and encouragement and prayer and service together (as we committed ourselves earlier).

And just like Jesus gave us the good and bad, so does James: in verse nine he says “Don’t grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

James urges us not to do those things, but instead to be patient, and live together as God wants his people to live... and he gives us some practical advice on how to do so.

Beginning at verse 13, he asks, “Is anyone among you in trouble?” and says, “Let them pray.” When we’re faced with troubles in our lives, we should take them to God in prayer.

Then “Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise.” It’s one of the things I keep coming back to – in the modern church, we don’t do joy well. We’re good at taking our faith seriously – if not solemnly, we’re good identifying problems we should be solving, and we’re even pretty good at confessing sins and asking for God’s forgiveness ... but happiness and joy? Not so much. But we should be identifying the happiness and joys of our lives, and praising God for them.

James goes on to ask “Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord” When someone is sick, we should be praying for them... and elders (whether elected Elders, or just people who have been Christians for a while), actually have a responsibility to pray for those who are sick. I don’t feel it’s necessary to anoint with oil, but sometimes something physical is helpful... whether it’s lighting a candle or holding the hand of a sick person or even laying on of hands.

James says “... And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up.” And that can be hard for us to understand, because our experience is that there are many people who are prayed for, but who don’t get better. Perhaps, though, it’s not about making them physically better, but offering them God’s comfort and peace. The assurance of something even better.

And James tells us that If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. This follows on from Jesus’ own teaching about forgiveness when he gave the disciples the Holy Spirit (John 20:23) “If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” There is this idea in the scriptures that God’s forgiveness of us is in some way tied to our forgiveness of others. We say it each week when we say the Lord’s prayer in church: “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”

We are assured that “The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.” And while that’s often hard to come grips with because our prayers aren’t always answered in the way we might hope or expect or even tell God they should be, it is an assurance. We are called to pray – to share our concerns and hopes and fears with God, but so often our prayers become shopping lists of what we’d like God to do for us.

James gives us the example of Elijah praying that it wouldn't rain, and it didn't, and then he prayed that it would, and it did rain... and the crops flourished once more. And I think that's a nice way of tying praying back to the idea of being patient. Remember back in verse seven "See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains."

Finally, in our reading, James says "My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins."

As we patiently wait for Jesus' return, we have this wonderful opportunity to bring people back to God. To Jesus. We don't have to pour water on them as we have for James today, but we should share with them the good news of Jesus – Jesus who lived and died and rose again, to open the way for all people to be reconciled with God.

So today, we praise God for all that God has done for us, and particularly, for James, and we pray for his whole family, for his godparents, and for all who love and support them, now and into the future, and we are patient, as we await the growth of God's kingdom, and the coming of the Lord.

Amen