

Sermon: Be God's heart, hands, and voice
James 2:1-17
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I guess this week you saw the awful pictures of a small 3 years old boy who drowned and whose body was washed ashore on a beach in Turkey. With his family he was making a desperate attempt to flee war and misery, to find a safe haven in Europe.

The boy was from the Kurdish town Kobani in Syria. The town was bombarded by heavy fighting earlier this year between ISIS (Daesh) and Kurdish fighters. ofcourse the parents wanted to find a safe place, a future for their kids. Is that not the dream of all parents?

The Middle East and part of Africa are in chaos; people become refugees; millions are adrift. And we here in Cairo, we all deal with poverty and with poor people on a daily basis.

How do we deal with the miseries on our doorstep?

Like many people, I have a tendency to not allow the misery around us to touch me too much. I think we often try to act if it is not there. The boys who sleep here in the street, the refugees who find it hard to feed their kids, the street sweeper who is despised and goes home with a few hundred pound a month.

1 Do not condescend

It is so easy to give a few pounds to comfort ourselves, that we have *done* something; we may even feel good about ourselves. St James, in his letter, calls us to a much more radical attitude towards the people who need help.

To a Jew in the days of St James, almsgiving was of paramount importance. Almsgiving was considered to be a man's one defense when he was judged by God. "Water will quench a flaming fire," writes Ben Sirach, "and alms make an atonement for sin" ([Sirach 3:30](#)).

In Islam we see these attitudes also - I read, for instance, on a muslim website, that almsgiving 'cleanses the heart, purifies the mind and soul and [surely, it also] reaches out to much needing Muslims.' But it is in the first place something for your own benefit.

And many Christians suffer from this egotistical attitude as well. Many Christians believe that if they give their money away, God will multiply their means. So we give in order to get more? That idea is really shameful for a Christian.

If this is our attitude, those whom we help will quickly sense how condescending our behavior actually is. We dispense of a few pounds to not be bothered any longer by their begging, or

to not be bothered by our own feelings of guilt. Or we use the poor person whom we help simply as a stepping stone for being in the good-book with God.

What St James writes about rich and poor in church is a good lesson for us - and it goes far beyond just doing "charity".

Do not treat the rich better than you treat the poor, is his message. This is radical.

James draws a picture of two men entering the church. The one is well-dressed and his fingers are covered with gold rings. The wealthy man was treated with great respect, the poor man was treated with contempt. Just as it happened in all of society.

"We adorn our fingers with rings," said Seneca, a Roman philosopher and statesman who lived at the time when James wrote his letter. And, Seneca said, "we distribute gems over every joint." Some in that period even rented rings to wear at the important social events.

In Greek and pagan society, people did not care much for the poor. The Stoics, the most popular trend in philosophy and lifestyle, they aimed at *apatheia*, apathy - the complete absence of feeling. Their aim was a life of serenity. Emotion disturbs serenity. The way to perfect calm was to do away with all emotions.

When Virgil in his book *Georgica* (2: 498) draws the picture of the perfectly happy man, he has no pity for the poor and no grief for those in trouble - because such emotions would only upset his own serenity.

Well, this is a rather normal attitude. We do not like pictures of a three year old little boy who drowned and lays dead on a beach. He could be my grandson. He could be your child.

If we see this in the news, we prefer to look away, maybe we quickly zap to a fun gameshow on TV maybe, to not be disturbed... It is much easier be stoic about all that misery.

But this is the very opposite of a Christian attitude. For the Stoic, blessedness meant being wrapped up in your own sweet, calm world; but for Christians, blessedness means actively sharing in the misfortunes of others. Being with the people; helping them, crying with them. Taking action.

Doing what God wants us to do.

2. We follow God

A Christian loves and respects people - including those in need- like our poor beggars, the street children, suffering people. And therefore James very strongly attacks the idea that in

church, those beggars, or any poor people, should be treated with less respect than those who have money to spend.

Think about this; when politicians or famous people come into church, we tend to treat them with utmost respect. Why? They are the same people who decide that the borders must be closed for refugees. They create the structures that oppress the poor.

The Church must be the place where all distinctions are wiped out. There can be no distinctions of rank and prestige and wealth when we meet together in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

In the presence of God all men are one and all deserve the same justice and the same possibility to live in peace and with enough food for their kids.

As Christians we take issue with every form of discrimination.

How we dress, our skin color, our nationality, our bank account, our social class, our hairstyle, none of that matters for God. And therefore in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church these matters are seen as trivial.

Our faith drives us to actively pursue the wellbeing of each and every person, irrespective of background.

All men and women are created in God's image; they have the same nature and origin and, being redeemed by Christ, they enjoy the same divine calling and destiny.

James' words certainly do urge everyone to make a real effort to promote the human dignity of all people we come across. The evil inequalities and oppression that afflict millions of men and women and children today, it openly contradicts the Gospel and cannot leave us indifferent.

What would Jesus do?

We help poor people because they have rights; because they have value; because they are made in the image of God. If that is our attitude, our support for the poor can never be condescending.

We help, we give, because we are one family of people. All are created by God, all are loved by God. He is immensely generous. He is always giving to us, as we are very needy. Maybe not for money - but we all have needs. And so we are in the same boat with all of humankind.

"God," said the American President Abraham Lincoln, "must love the common people because he made so many of them."

God does not show any partiality at judgment. For him our wealth, or our passport, is irrelevant. He challenges us for our personal behavior, and it is abundantly clear in the Bible - that if we have much, and someone else has a need, we have to act as the hands of God.

If someone needs a roof, can we refuse? If someone needs food, can we close our heart? If we have a safe country, can we close our doors?

Jesus - he was of course the ultimate Hand of God, more than anyone else. In his first sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth his claim was: "God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor."

So how can we look down on people with less than we have, if God loves them and Jesus made that love so very visible?

James says,

Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?

He promised the Kingdom to those who love Him. Love for God is what He cares about. That is what he looks for.

But, you, James writes, "you have dishonored the poor man." You treat him badly. We try to safeguard our wealth, our economies, so by all means, let us keep the poor people out.

If it is not acceptable for Christians to keep the poor out of our church, so how can we close the gates of our countries? Should we in church not model how God wants all of the world to behave?

Are we too afraid that our Gross National Product goes down by half a percent?

God has chosen the poor, the refugees, but we mistreat them by acting as if they are less important as human beings than our politicians, our rock stars, our business people.

And to side with the rich is not even logical for those Christians, James says, "Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?" (Verse 7)

Looking down on any person, looking down on the poor, is so serious that it amounts, according to James, to "blaspheming that honorable name by which you are called". To treat people with money better than people with nothing in their pocket is blasphemy.

To treat refugees as dirt is blasphemy. Jesus and his family were once refugees - imagine that Egypt had closed its borders for Jesus. Maybe they would have been forced to board an unsafe little boat to escape to Greece instead.

3 To each what they need

St James writes,

If you perfectly keep the royal law, [...] "You must love your neighbor as yourself," then you do well. But if you treat people with respect of persons, such conduct is sin and you stand convicted by the law as transgressors.

James refers to the 'royal law' of Scripture, love your neighbor as yourself. That is the normal lifestyle for those who love God. But if we have to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, than any discrimination between people is impossible.

I have to love the poor man as I love myself;
I have to love the white man as I love myself;
I have to love the rich man as I love myself;
I have to love the refugee as I love myself;
I have to love the black woman as I love myself.

Men, women, thieves, refugees, wealthy people, ugly people, nice people, illiterate people, politicians, and professors in university, I have to love them as I love myself.

The gist of the diatribe of James against snobbery and stoicism in regard to the misery around us, seems to be this: Faith must live in true brotherly love. Do not try to combine faith in Christ with worship of social status, that will not work.

Do not combine faith in Christ with thinking that your tribe is more important than other tribes. Do not assume that the borders of your country are more important than people. That is a breach of the Law of Love.

I do not suggest that there are easy political solutions to the problem that we presently face. But the economy or the political situations in our lands can never be used as an inhumane argument for not immediately solving the problems of millions of human beings in real and urgent need.

James is sharp. "For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment."

Neglect and disdain for the poor or for anyone who is different than we are, implies acting without mercy, and anyone who acts like that will be judged by God without mercy.

Jesus agreed with James; in Mat 5:7 he said, "blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy".

What does this mean, "Mercy triumphs over judgment"? It means that anyone who practices mercy will be confident and even happy to face God's judgment because he knows that God will show him mercy.

St Augustine said about this. "When the just King sits in judgment, who will claim to be pure in heart? Who will boast of being free of sin? No-one of course. What hope could there be if mercy did not prevail over judgment? But that mercy will be applied only to those who are themselves merciful." (Letter, 167,6,20)

I must be clear - only Jesus Christ gets us safely through judgment; if you are linked by faith to the Son of God, your life is safe in God's hands.

But faith without actions of love - is not true faith in Jesus Christ. James calls this dead faith. Dead faith is good for being buried, it has no value for God.

Conclusion

So think about your own lifestyle and your actions. How does it show love, respect and care for all people? How does it reflect the views of God for his people on earth?

Let us ask God to help us to see, understand, and feel what happens around us with his eyes and mind and heart.

And let us then act. Act with love and respect for all people around us.

If your kids need something, if your brother or sister has an urgent, if your cousin needs your help, I am sure you help as much as you can. This is the normal love for the family.

Well, as Christian we know that we are also one family as humankind, as God created all. And especially as a church we are one family.

Do not close your heart for the needs of the worldwide family of humanity;

And act. Do what you can, here around you.

And raise your voice, to defend the rights of those who have lost all hope.

Be God's heart, and hands, and voice.

Because all people have a right to live in peace and with a roof and with food for their kids.

Amen

