**Sermon, 18 September 2016**

*Reading*

*James 4:1-10*

*What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.*

*You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says:*

*“God opposes the proud*

*but shows favor to the humble.”*

*Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.*

What a stunningly beautiful world we live in! It is so beautiful that it sometimes takes my breath away. I often wonder what had happened billions of years ago that gave way to so much beauty. There is such a variety of shapes and forms, it is a miracle, and there is a whole universe that we cannot measure nor understand, nor do we have the slightest idea what lies beyond. Looking up to the stars on a clear night is simply mind blowing!

We are born into this wonderful world, which already is a miracle in itself, but furthermore we are equipped with something even more stunning: we are able to love and to build a bond of affection with the creatures that share this beautiful planet with us. Love is an emotion so strong, so unique, that it binds us together and gives our life purpose. It makes it all worthwhile. And looking at the vast space around us, we need a sense of purpose. We would be pretty lost without it. We are equipped with this thing called love that ultimately is all it comes down to in life. It gives us a deep sense of gratitude and affection and builds the fundament for respect and generosity and ultimately peace. We are called to share our love and give plentiful to every living being that is part of this beautiful world, and if we also get an awful lot back.

Yet in the Letter of James that we have just heard it says: “Don't you know that to be the world's friend means to be God's enemy? If you want to be the world's friend, you make yourself God's enemy.”

This is a Bible passage that makes me stumble and has made stumble many Bible readers before. If this stunning world is part of God’s creation, then how can our friendship with it separate us from God? God herself walked this earth and became part of it through Jesus Christ. God himself loved this world and its inhabitants so much that he became human, was born, lived and died to bring compassion into this world. So is this not exactly what we are called to do: to become the world’s friend?

About 100 years after the death of Jesus on the cross, a scholar named James had written this letter to the early Christians. Christian communities had started to spread fast in different parts of the Roman Empire. Unlike the letters of Paul which we also know from the New Testament and were written about half a century earlier, the Letter of James is not addressed to one particular congregation. Whereas Paul’s letters tackle specific issues that needed to be addressed, like issues of faith, conflicts within the community or questions of good leadership, the Letter of James is more like a general ethical code that was meant as a guideline to the various communities. These ethical guidelines are today just as valid as 2000 years ago and they can be summarised as follows:

1. God is on the side of the poor, so do not judge people according to their wealth or appearance.

2. Be steadfast in your love to God, do not be tempted by the devil and be generous.

3. Do not only listen to God’s word, but act accordingly.

4. Be humble and do not engage in dispute and conflict.

5. Be aware of the power of words, and therefore tame your tongue and do not curse.

6. Be patient and do not judge one another.

7. Refrain from luxury.

8. Pray for the sick, and ask others to pray for you.

The Letter of James is a great summary of what Christian life is about and I think we should all hang these in our house as a reminder to read through in the morning.

These ethical guidelines teach us how to be a good person in this world and how to build strong communities for everyone’s sake. Therefore, it seems like a contradiction when James writes in the same letter that being the world’s friend means to be God’s enemy. Why bother at all?

When James speaks about the world he does not mean the natural world. He means the world that we create around us and often mistake for the world, but which separates further and further away from God’s creation. He means all the manmade worldly things and systems that so often hold us back from seeing the bigger picture and which stand between us and God’s creation. One of our church members, Frank, who has passed away a couple of years ago used to say how sad he felt that we cannot even see the stars in London because of all the light pollution. We cannot touch the earth, we cannot drink from the river. We are distracted by so many things that separate us from the world - and not only the natural world! All the things that we mistakenly take for the world also keep us from bonding with each other, and it also keeps us from bonding with ourselves and ultimately with God. It is this artificial world that James means. And I can surely think of hundreds of things straight away in my own life!

So often I stand in front of my wardrobe not knowing what to wear, and I can get really frustrated.

So often I am worried about money and wonder if the money I put aside for my retirement will be enough to live well.

So often I am annoyed because the copy machine or the printer does not work properly and I am behind with work.

And worst of all (and this is an issue that James and the early Christian communities certainly did not have): so often I get really impatient because the internet is too slow or because the Wifi does not work. Can’t download google maps! Can’t check my emails! Can’t write a text message!

We spend so much time worrying about things. We spend so much time sitting around being frustrated. What if we would use this time to appreciate the things that are naturally given to us?

It is an interesting question to ask ourselves: What are the worldly things we worry most about? And what are the things that we do far too little because we are busy worrying? (…)

The more we possess, the more worried we become. We want to hold on to our possessions. We want to be fashionable, rich, popular and well connected. We want to please. We want to fit in. And here lies the danger: for the sake of pleasing others we so often say and do nothing when someone needs our help. So often we do not stand up and raise our voice for the poor and the weak, because we are worried what the others might think. So often we judge others for their appearance or their lifestyle, because it is disturbing our own little system and challenges our presumptions. So often we remain silent for the sake of superficial peace in our communities, countries or families. And so often we think that this superficial peace is Christian, when all it really does is serving our own interests and protect our own little world.

We are not called to be friends with the world. We are called to be friends with God. This means to act in a way that is in the best interest of God’s creation, all the creatures that live in it, and breathe the same air as we do. It means to act in the best interest of the fertile earth that feeds us, the earth that we are destroying little by little, undermining our livelihood which moves us further away from God. By being friends with the worldly things we become the enemies of God. Therefore, to be friends with God sometimes means to make unpopular decisions and say things that are disturbing our worldly systems.

Christianity is a religion of peace, but not the kind of superficial and selfish peace that makes us silently suffer. For the greater peace, it is sometimes necessary to be outspoken, even in our own families and communities. Yet, this only works if we remain humble at heart, knowing that we know and understand only a tiny little part from a bigger truth. No human being, government or religion can ever claim to know the truth. To claim the truth will eventually lead into war and destruction.

There is a way to remain humble and committed to God’s creation: we just need to lift our eyes up to the stars from time to time, away from the worldly things around us, and all the things that preoccupy and frustrate us. The view into the universe reminds us how little we really are in the grand scheme of things, and what a miracle it is to be blessed with such an amazing planet to live on. Humbleness is the way to wisdom, and wisdom will show us the way when it is time to stand up for what is right and to become friends with God’s wonderful world.

Amen