

Formed by the Word: hearing and doing

Bible reading: James 1:19-27

1. We are in the third week of our sermon series on the Life of a Disciple. Last week, we were reminded that we are formed for a purpose and that we need to respond to God's initiative. Today, we are considering together that we are formed by the Word. We need to hear what God is saying to us and put it into practice. It sounds so simple, but if we are honest, most of us struggle with this. We can often feel burdened, buckled and broken. My aim is for us to discover more of the reality of God and what He has done for us so we are free to listen more clearly, love God and other people more and live out our faith day-by-day. So, let's pray. Father God, may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable to you. Amen.
2. As a child of the 1970s, Saturday afternoons were filled by watching black and white films on BBC2. Most of them seemed to be boring 'Cowboys and Indians' Westerns featuring John Wayne, but now and again there would be something far more entertaining that I could enjoy. I think my favourite must have been Danny Kaye in the film about Hans Christian Anderson. The highlight for me was the song of the Ugly Duckling. "There once was an ugly duckling with feathers all stubby and brown. And other birds said in so many words, 'get out of town'."^A As I have been preparing this sermon, this story has kept coming to mind.
3. In this context, I want us to study our reading from James, chapter 1, and verses 19-27. The author is thought to be the brother of Jesus and it is suggested that the letter could have been written some time in the AD40s, well before the Gospel accounts themselves.^B I first want us to consider what life was like for those to whom the letter was addressed. We see from the start of chapter 1 that James is writing to the Jewish Christians from the 'twelve tribes scattered among the nations', living in the diaspora beyond Israel: after the exile, many Jews chose to stay in the gentile lands. You could say that they had 'got out of town and stayed out of town'.
4. These believers faced oppression and persecution. Indeed, verse 2 talks of the trials that they were facing, while verse 6 mentions doubts and verse 20, anger. The calls for righteousness indicate that life was unjust and not fair. "That poor little ugly duckling went wandering far and near. But at every place, they said to his face 'Now get out, get out, get out of here!'"^A
5. So what did James' letter say to these scattered, persecuted and troubled believers to give them hope? It reminds them, in verse 20, that God desires righteousness. "Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." This is reinforced in verse 26, when he tells them to "keep a tight rein" on their tongues. James then urges them in verse 21 to cut out the bad stuff – "the moral filth and evil that is so prevalent."

6. Let's note as well what he says about "humbly accepting the word planted in you which can save you." This resonates with the stories that will have been passed on about the parables of Jesus, later recorded in the Gospels. It is not enough to receive the word with joy, like seed on rocky ground, only to fall away when trouble or persecution comes. It is not enough to be unfruitful, like seed falling among thorns, which is choked from growing fully by the worries of this life.
7. James calls the believers, in verse 22, not just to listen to the word but to do what it says. "Those who do not forget the word but do it will be blessed in what they do." This is like the seed falling on good soil, which produces a crop yielding thirty, sixty or a hundred times what was sown. These are actions that make a positive difference in God's world and in our own communities, such as in verse 27 - looking after those in need and in distress. At the heart of what James is saying is the need to keep oneself from being polluted by the world – being impervious to it, like water off a duck's back.
8. So, in today's world, have we cracked it? I would freely admit to you that I, for one, haven't. Yes, I know that I believe that Jesus died for my sins so that I might be freed from the chains of sin and death. I can see what James is getting at when he says 'just hear it and just do it'. But it is not as simple as that. I do my best to live out my faith but I am often overwhelmed by the stress of competing demands and priorities, by feelings of inadequacy, disappointment and regret, and fears for the future. In the words of Paul (from Romans 7) "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate I do." This just makes us feel more guilty, more convicted and more miserable.
9. Despite our suave and sophisticated exteriors, many of us can so often feel like ugly ducklings. Ugly ducklings who have been told that they are not good enough, not clever enough, not pretty or handsome enough. Ugly ducklings, who have been laughed at, ridiculed or rejected. Ugly ducklings who feel the pain and disappointment that they do not fit in, or have not been accepted. Ugly ducklings who do not feel worthy enough to be loved, even by the love of God. Ugly ducklings who feel bad for what they have said or done, or not said or done. 'Surely', the ugly duckling says, 'I am not good enough for God? Surely, he wouldn't use me?' As the song goes, "All through the winter time, he hid himself away. Ashamed to show his face. Ashamed of what others may say."^A
10. But, there is a way forward. And it builds on what Peter said to us a couple of weeks ago, at the start of this sermon series, when he talked about people's attitudes and particularly the dangers of having a passive attitude to faith. Whether it is, in part, a feature of the human condition or whether it is partly informed by our experiences and knocks we have received along the way, at the heart of our difficulties in hearing and doing the word are elements of unbelief or, at least, doubts that the hope applies to us.

11. Words of faith and promise can be crowded out by disappointment and worry and fear. We will only truly listen when we realise that there is someone speaking who is bothered about us, loves us and is for us. That we are here in church suggests that we have a deep desire to believe, but sometimes we find it difficult for all the pieces to slot into place. Behind this, there is a common misunderstanding which could well have been a candidate for a title of a Jane Austen novel: *Response and Responsibility*. As Christians, it is important that we make a response to what God has done for us, but we are not responsible for making it all happen. Don't be put off by the mention in verse 25 about 'looking intently into the perfect law'. This is really about the fulfilment of Old Testament law in the person of Jesus. It is not about struggling to comply with laws and rules and regulations after all. It is about grace. There is nothing we can do to make God love us more or less^C. God's love for us is locked in and secure.
12. Many of us can spend so much time feeling like ugly ducklings that we can forget to realise that we have already been transformed. "All through the winter in his lonely clump of wheat, til a flock of swans spied him there and very soon agreed. You're a very fine swan indeed."^A Our creator God has already brought us life^C. The Old Testament is peppered with stories of characters from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob onwards who don't provide fantastic role models of how to behave. But God loves them anyway and keeps on providing promises and hope even when they go the wrong way. However we might feel about ourselves, God loves us to bits, even though we often get things wrong. He knew that we were worth dying for and rising again. You're not an ugly duckling. You're a very fine swan indeed.
13. When we realise we're not a hopeless case, we then have greater cause to listen to God's word^C, recognising that it applies to us after all. It is worth listening to because we don't have to work out all the answers for ourselves. Last week, Peter told of how he contacted a friend with an offer of prayer. The friend asked for prayers for greater wisdom and later said that he felt that those prayers had been answered.
14. The parable of the sower, mentioned earlier, can sometimes be off-putting if we live under the mistaken impression that our chances of growing the seeds of faith depend on the type of soil that we happen to be. If our sense of worth prompts us to conclude that we are bound to be rocky ground or thorn-ridden, what hope do we have? But our faith is not fatalistic. God wants us to succeed. If we don't feel that we have got what we need, we can pray for soil improvement:
 - praying for wisdom where there is a lack of understanding;
 - praying for support and fellowship from the wider church for sapling Christians without much of a root system yet;
 - praying for endurance and more faith when trouble comes;
 - praying that we may keep our focus and integrity and make time for God when we feel in danger of getting choked by weeds.

15. Similarly, I would suggest that we slip up in our faith when we are already feeling condemned or out of God's love. Guilt and despair breed more guilt and despair. The crux of the matter is that God's not cross with us, but His cross frees us and releases us. We need to spend more time feeling loved, instead of guilty. Knowing that we are loved provides a much greater motivation to do things God's way, turn our back on former ways of behaving, and love others^C.
16. So what is there from what we have considered this morning that you and I can work on in the week ahead?
- If your faith feels to you a little on the stale side, like the bread thrown at ducks by well-meaning children, I would encourage you look afresh at the promises of God. At every Communion Service, we say together, 'He is here, his Spirit is with us'. Let us all stop to recognise the magnitude of what that means.
 - Or, if this talk prompts you to want to do more hearing and doing of God's word this week, what is that going to look like? When will you fit in a few more minutes Bible-reading and prayer time each day? What can you do to reflect God's love to others, through our acts of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control?
 - Or, if you feel like an ugly duckling, I would encourage you both to pray that God will show that He has already transformed you into a very fine swan indeed, and to seek the love, support and affirmation of our own church family. You will not be the only one going 'quack' today!

Sources:

- A. 'The Ugly Duckling'. Lyrics by Frank Loesser, 1951
- B. 'Oxford Bible Commentary', edited by John Barton and John Muddiman, page 1256
- C. 'The Disciple: on becoming truly human' by Lucy Peppiatt