

SSF June 13<sup>th</sup> 2004 **James 4 1-12** ‘Desire, the Root of Unhappiness’

This is a passage jam-packed with strong feelings and HYPERBOLE. One overall message, but lots of phrases and words in it you could choose for a title. ‘Desire the Root of Unhappiness’ was suggested, but that struck me as not going quite far enough back. Desire makes unhappiness, but what makes desire? Look at 4.4 YOU ADULTERERS! (Does that make you uneasy? Let’s maintain that delicate frisson of unease (put up phrase on OHP) DON’T YOU REALISE THAT FRIENDSHIP WITH THIS WORLD MAKES YOU AN ENEMY OF GOD...’. So what is this WORLD that friendship with is so bad?

Have you ever taken part in the ritualised communal exhortation of a newly-born infant? That is what they do in some Christian groups, such as the Church of England (we don’t do it quite the same here); one of the things a church-full of voices says to the infant is ‘Fight manfully (womanfully?) (personfully?) Under his banner against the WORLD the FLESH and the DEVIL. (Put up OHPs in turn, then overlay) A triumvirate of enemies that this little baby is going to meet up ahead, and that, if he does really become a Christian, he is going to have to struggle with.

Leave the world a moment. The flesh I guess most of us know about. In a very English way we indulge it behind closed doors. Put your hand up if you think your carnal appetites exceed those of the person sitting on your left (no, don’t...). I could talk plenty more about the flesh but that is not where we are today. Nor about the devil, although he is behind and beyond a lot of things, the world and flesh included. If you really get into, really bow down to either the world or the flesh you find yourself in his waiting room. But I suspect we don’t have any, or at least, no more than a handful of card-carrying Satanists who regularly attend Stepping Stones. Having said this, I did go to see the current Harry Potter film this week....

Back to the WORLD. How often do we use the phrase ‘the World’ at Stepping Stones?. When do we last read in the e-mailed Prayer Requests ‘Margaret Swaddle is feeling tempted by the World this week’. It’s not a phrase we use. Why not. Is it because?

- 1) We have, in fact, defeated it; the world lies vanquished some way back, beside the road with a big sword stuck through it (getting smelly like one of those poor badgers on the roads round here that just don’t understand about motor cars)
- 2) Actually, the whole concept of the world being bad is old-fashioned, as Christians we have become mature and outgrown it. Worldliness is OK, in fact it is the thing we should be...
- 3) Because we are in it too deep to see it; you cannot see a pond, as such, when you are lying on the bottom of it. Like the badgers and motor cars, we just don’t understand

So let’s look at this concept of ‘the world’ or ‘this world’ for a bit. I was brought up in the Salvation Army, where use of the phrase lasted longer than most places. When I was young and first met it; it aroused my infant curiosity ‘Mummy, what is WORDLY? Actually I think the specific enquiry, roused by some comment I heard’, was ‘WHAT IS A WORLDLY WOMAN?’ The answer was simple; it was one who wore **lipstick**. OK, I understood. Nice and simple. But slowly I began to become aware that there were other worldly things as well, and in particular

there was a thing called WORLDLY ENTERTAINMENT. This sounded fun, but it was obviously frowned on. Because when I was 12 or 13 it was suggested I sign a document called 'Orders and Regulations for Salvation Soldiers' and one of the things you had to sign up not to do was to enter any place where this commodity was on offer, unless for the express purpose of spreading the Gospel. This troubled me. For instance, a Salvation Army Brass Band Concert (or even, later on, a Joystings gig) was not worldly entertainment, it was in-house, it was OK, but anywhere you went outside must be worldly. So I could not go, I remember arguing, to a county cricket match.. If it wasn't in it must be out.."Oh, don't worry about things like that, just sign". I never did. (But in truth, in all of adult life, I have only ever spent one day at a county cricket match, in 1974, Yorkshire v Derbyshire, Abbeydale Park, Sheffield, with Boycott scoring a century. It was enough)

All this will make you laugh. Here is a sadder true story. A Malaysian girl we know told us she had become a Christian in a Pentecostal church; one day they found her wearing lipstick and she had to leave, for being worldly. Fair enough; she went to another church. After a while they quizzed her, she had been a Pentecostal, did she speak in tongues? Yes. So they threw her out as well..... With churches like this the poor old world, flesh and devil are all out of a job.

Now, one technique for stopping something worrying us, or nagging our consciences, is to ridicule it. We exaggerate one aspect, then mock it (and if you have seen the Harry Potter film, this is precisely how you deal with Boggarts, which are things with no substance that take on the shape of your fears). So, good advice, if you meet a Boggart. But that is our danger here, are we saying James, and Jesus before him, were wrong, and that the world, or whatever they meant by the world, is a harmless shadow?

So what in the world is the world?. Here we have to engage our minds. Louis Armstrong sang 'What a Wonderful World' - and all the things he lists under this heading are precisely not the ones we are talking about today. Humans are perverse, they use same word to mean quite different things. Get even more complex, think 'The Word' with a capital W. Jesus? the Bible? Draw back even further, think the word 'God'... same word, very different concepts with different people. That is where we are. But the World-we-are-talking-about- today is not Louis Armstrong's skies of blue, baby's first cries, friends saying hello. It is more a popular, widely accepted way-of-doing-things, way-things-fit-together, way-of-judging-things way-of-assessing-what's-important that people decide for themselves, without reference to God, without reference to Jesus. It is the right label over against any quality. And for people who have no cognisance of God or Jesus, or any reality outside this world, it is not a concept that would make a great deal of sense (...if you are lying on the bottom of a pond you cannot see the pond) And yet it is something that has a power, an inner consistency, a cohesion all of its own, it is not just random chance. It is not just culture, not just taste. It seems to have a life of its own; maybe it is the devil doing his usual behind-the-scenes thing. It changes its colour and shape from generation to generation. It is all what I call why-do-you-labour-for-that-which-is- not-bread stuff. It is about image, fashion, what is socially acceptable, what makes you score points in other people's estimation, what makes you feel good about yourself. Good about yourself, *for a while*. Keeps the dark out, *for a while*. A warm feeling, *for a while*...So you see what I mean?.

It is claims to answer this screaming need we seem to have, **to be significant**; the ultimate

success is not to be good, or clever, but to be seen by millions. I saw a bizarre example of this recently. I was at friend's house and the TV was on, showing what claimed to be a 'reality' programme. It involved two chefs, one young one who ran a restaurant and an apparently well-known older one visiting it. The older one expressed himself with a notably limited repertoire of English that relied on a heavy usage of perjorative Anglo-Saxon adverbs and adjectives. The younger chef was, to put it mildly, not very good; the older one pointed this out, in a forthright manner.. That was the programme. I was puzzled. If this was 'reality', ie was really happening, then how on earth did the younger chef allow this all to be filmed, to let millions see him slagged off and wiped the floor with? Do they pay him enough money to have plastic surgery and a new life in the Bahamas? No, apparently the fame, of being someone significant people had seen on the telly, that was enough....

So tellyfame, being a significant person, is part of the World's allure today. For Salvationists women in the 1950s maybe lipstick, or the desire to wear it, was part of it. For Mennonites, a Christian group in the USA, it was chrome on cars. Same thing, a desire to show off. They got round that particular little bit of the world by painting over exposed chrome, and so earned their title 'Black Bumper Mennonites'. That was then, we smile. What about us, now?

At Stepping Stones we have cast aside or left behind quite a few traditional Christian attitudes; in many ways this may be a good thing, but beware! We often leave behind things because they are OLD FASHIONED. Here we need to stand back a bit - jump on to our own orbiting asteroid, my usual simile - and take a good look. What dictates fashion? Is it just the World that asks.. "Is it old fashioned?" (Classic answer 'So is breathing - but it still works') . Is this a question a Christian ought to ask? Is it good? is it useful? those are OK asks.

So out there is this World thing, made up of stuff that **for no good reason** controls peoples tastes, hopes, expectations, the way they judge each other. Try and pin it down and it wriggles. Quite a lot of Christians, in the USA at least, have decided that rock music is all evil, because it is certainly associated with lots of these things; they say this particular thing, this style, is of the world, like lipstick, ban it and we will be better off. I could divert into another talk at this point, but won't. Banning a style of music does not work, it is only a thing, that can be used for bad or good. Ban it and - think about this - you are denying God his right to communicate through it. Built a curtain wall around yourself and your little community, to shut the big bad world outside - and a personalised even more pernicious version of the world will spring up inside it, or inside the hearts of those inside it.

So the World is never one specific thing, but I have been trying to think of something that typifies or illustrates it - or at least a popular version of it that affects a lot of people, and here is my attempt - a colour supplement. It typifies many things about the world - fashion, the sort of things you should wear, the sort of things you should think, the places you should eat, the sort of stuff you should read, to be in, accepted. It is written by people who are experts at nothing except writing words. Usually critics, skilled at criticism, that is their art form. (It was very instructive to read the reviews of the Mel Gibson's recent 'The Passion of the Christ' in that they showed up both the reviewers' lack of knowledge of the original story and their attitude towards its subject, far more than comment on the film itself; Jesus, even as portrayed by Hollywood, always holds a mirror). They are bright, wise (or worldly-wise, that old phrase),

avant garde, daring. A fortnight ago we had an article, only half serious of course, advocating liberating humans to have sexual relations with animals. Let's be brave, shatter those last taboos. Look at us, heroes, we can spit in the face of God and run away! Now of course there may be the odd good informative readable article as well - or is it readable just because we have got used to reading. Sit and read a colour supplement - or watch an evening's television, and then go and then STAND BACK, take a cold shower, go out on your own and sit on a mountain top (or maybe at the bottom of the garden), get clear of distractions, and see it from a distance...

So, at last, back from a 21<sup>st</sup> century colour supplement to 1<sup>st</sup>-century James, an ordinary human still reeling at coming to terms with what he heard from his extraordinary half brother.. Were his listeners *really* committing adultery, *really* killing each other, *really* possessed by a whole army of evil desires? What he was saying was that the world - and however it manifested itself in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, I could speculate but won't - aroused these desires, and those desires affected the way they related together, how they judged each other, and caused all sorts of troubles. The world had got into their hearts, and, as Jesus had said, a man cannot serve two masters. So....You can't be a friend of the world and a friend of God.

This is because there is an alternative to the World, and the God's shorthand for that is the Kingdom. They cannot both exist in the same space, and that space is a human heart- the control centre of our wills, desires and aspirations. Jesus set out the difference when he spoke to Pilate 'My Kingdom is not of this world'. His Kingdom is in fact the **Antithesis** of the World. The Kingdom means God's way of doing things, of relating to each other, of making judgements (or not making judgements); seeing things through a new pair of glasses, or maybe taking off our old glasses and seeing them with a new pair of eyes. Seeing the created world, the planet - good but marred by man - created humanity - good but marred by sin - through his eyes rather than just our own. Our own vision has been fouled up by years of learning the wrong stuff, being squeezed, day in and day out, into the mould the world, flesh and devil have combined to shape. There is a mould out there with your name on it...

Quite a lot of recent Christian exhortation I have stood in the line of has been to the effect that we need to be 'earthed', be salt and light at the core of society, be clued up as to the world and its tastes, appropriate to its culture, communicate the Gospel in a contemporary context. All this is true, BUT we can only do these things effectively when we see that the World, in James (and Jesus') sense is still there, still deadly, still as distracting, still wanting to suck our souls out. **In the world and not of it** - we can only be there when we know what the world is, when we know our enemy, when, though we may be in the world it is the Kingdom, not the world, that is in us.

So, with the Kingdom, God's vision, is in us, we look at the world, and we both **see it** and we **see through it**. We don't see the trendy, the successful, the people-we-ought-to-be-like, the whoever is flavour of the week. We see what Jesus saw, the lost children, the sheep milling round without a shepherd, people clutching at things that just crumble to nothing in their hands, people out on the road with evening falling fast, and the terror of having nowhere to go.

So its Vision that is the key to it, **seeing the World** and **seeing through it**. How do we do that? Reading Scripture helps - here are a few relevant verses, and at the end a repeat of a chunk of today's bit of James which makes the answer to it all clear - when faced with the world, we

come to God. This time it's from the Message, and thus a tad Transatlantic, but gets the exhorting feel

I will indulge in a bit of symbolism as I read them (tear up colour supplements)

**Jn 15 18-19 (Jesus says) If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world., That is why the world hates you**

**I Cor 3.19 (Paul says) For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's eyes**

**I Jn 2.17 (John says) The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives for ever.**

**Jn16.33 (Jesus says)In the world you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, I have overcome the world**

**James 4, 7-10 (James says) 'Yell a loud *no* to the Devil and watch him scamper. Say a quiet *yes* to God and he'll be there in no time. Quit dabbling in sin. Purify your inner life. Quit playing the field. Hit bottom, and cry your eyes out. The fun and games are over. Get serious, really serious. Get down on your knees before your Master; it's the only way you'll get on your feet.**

Here is a song about seeing through... ('Where the Lion stands')