

James 5. Patience, Prayer and Perseverance

(OHP Jesus as a hot air balloon)

Jesus the Hot Air Balloon is based in Tracy, California, and is the latest evangelistic balloon project of The Merritt Ministry. He's 110 feet tall and has hands 20 feet long. He weighs over 750lbs and is filled with 258,000 cubic feet of air. It took 13 weeks to sew him together. 'Jesus, in a majestic purple robe, trimmed in gold, rising above a base of white clouds, in all power and majesty as is presented in the book of Revelation. The balloon, which bears the slogan 'King of kings, Lord of Lords' across the back of Jesus's robe, is currently touring the United States.

The Second Coming. There are, I believe, around 80- references in the NT to Jesus' returning. One of them comes in the first verse of today's passage, the last bit of the Book of James. I've been given a title for this 'Patience, Prayer and Perseverance' (three things I am not very good at); the NIV has 'Patience in Suffering' and 'The Prayer of Faith', but how about 'James signs off'. There's only a couple of inches left on the bottom of the parchment, or the scribe is looking at his hourglass, and pointing out he has a ticket for the Games that evening.... James could have said more, so he makes a last handful of pithy points, pieces of sound advice to the infant churches who are going to be reading his letter.

The first thing he says relates to the Second Coming. This is a doctrine with a certain tension about it. Quite a lot of the book of James is sound moral advice about controlling the tongue and how we treat the poor, stuff that is not expressly spiritual or theological. Stuff a charitable humanist (maybe with a socialist bent) would not find hard to swallow - but there are a couple of things in this last chapter that the charitable humanist would balk at, stuff that takes us out into expressly Christian waters, and sometimes troubled waters at that.

One of these is the Second Coming. If 'Jesus the Hot Air Balloon' makes you smile here are a couple of things, also from across the Atlantic, to worry you, to economise on your use of All Bran if you think about them too much., They also relate to use, or misuse, of this doctrine. I read recently that the Reagan administration deliberately ignored environmental concerns on the grounds that they were irrelevant because Jesus would be back soon to put an end to history. Think about it; mankind put in a garden to tend and care, tending up trashing Eden for their own selfish gain because God, who is on their side, will turn up and make it all right. That is the environment. Also, at the moment, the 'Christian right' is condoning Israeli oppression of the Palestinians on the grounds that they actually want to provoke an end-times showdown between themselves and the Muslim Antichrist, on the grounds that this, by their understanding (or misunderstanding) of Scripture will force Jesus to show up and take their side...

All deeply worrying stuff. Let's have a ruthless-honesty day. The Second Coming is not

an easy doctrine. As opposed to the crazy USA, what does gentle moderate Anglican Christian Middle-England do? Maybe we speak out the bit about believing that Jesus is coming again in Glory in our creeds. We speak it out partly because this is a done thing, a good thing that people have been doing for donkey's years and, well, if you can't quite believe it all it's still a good and traditional thing to speak it out. We're all doing it together so it must be OK...

Where in all of this do I stand? My basic building block is that I believe in Jesus, and that, looking at the world-and-everything, Jesus is what it's all about. So I take what he said seriously. And that he is outside history, and has his hands on the strings. He knows how this world will end up, Islamic superstate, nuclear Armageddon, impacting asteroid, Second Ice Age. In the long run he is in control and in some way beyond our minds, beyond our thinking, he will redeem, he will rescue, he will return. He talks to us about it, as usual, in picture language that some of us are desperate to take literally. The details and the timetable we are not to be concerned with; he is very clear that we do not know the day and the hour....

And so, to James. And James 5, 7 in the 'Message' 'Meanwhile friends, wait patiently for the Master's Arrival'. It's worth looking at the meanwhile, which links it to the first paragraph, 'and a final word to you arrogant rich'. In this paraphrase it feels as if James has stepped outside of time, and instead of just addressing first-century excesses, is talking to the world now (read 'Message' first paragraph'.

So 'Meanwhile', 'in the light of this' Are we getting topical; is the 2000-year gap fading?

What are we to do. James talks about patience. Look at the farmer he says, the farmer has faith in certain given constants, the spring and autumn rains. He is not worrying about climate change or global warming, to him the same things happen every year; outside his control, but to be depended upon. So he is patient; good thing., most folk approve of patience, it is a basic lesson of life we spend a lot of time teaching to small children - **not** until teatime, etc.

But the church is not waiting for seasonal rain, it is waiting for Jesus to return. As James says 'the Judge is standing at the door' That is true, in God's eyes, both for the world's time and our time. Be ready. The Christian always wears clean underpants because he might be run over by a bus.

Meanwhile again, it's a good word. It could preface all the rest of James' concerns. Meanwhile is the place we live. Meanwhile, urgent bits of pithy advice. Verse 9, don't grumble against each other. The Message ' Friends, don't complain about each other. A far greater complaint could be lodged against you, you know'. We - or at least the sub-species of humanity that I belong to - are natural complainers, we've got whinge in our genes.

If you want a good example, James says look at Scripture. The old prophets. The image of Job, seated on a dunghill scraping at his boils with a potsherd, he's not a happy bunny, he's not a King's Kid travelling First Class. But he is the one God commends, and the one God sorts it out for, against all odds, in the end.

Then, quite suddenly, in verse 12, we get 'Above all, my brothers, do not swear'. Hang on - this isn't James at all, it's his big brother talking. Straight, virtually verbatim echoes of Jesus' teaching Matthew 5, 33-37.. We could have a whole sermon on this one because what it means for us today is not easy to unpick. I will be brief. It is about using other things, including God, to back up our words, which shows we lack integrity, a straight yeah or nay should be enough. The footnote in my NIV says 'James is not condemning the taking of solemn oaths'... are footnotes inspired? I certainly think the swearing-on-a-Bible in English courts of law falls under this one, so when I did jury service I refused. How about an in-house Christian implication; perhaps it is in using an implication that God has given you a specific word on a subject when actually he hasn't. Disagree with me and you are disagreeing with the Holy Spirit. Is this too much of a sideways step? It happens.

On to verses 13-16. Church-life-in-a-nutshell. As 'the Message' puts it 'are you hurting? Pray. Do you feel great? Sing. Are you sick? Call the church leaders together to pray and anoint you with oil in the name of the Master. Believing-prayer will heal you'. All of life is there, and my response is Amen, Amen and...a-hem. It's ruthless-honesty day, remember?

The last time, and in fact the only time that I specifically went to church leaders to be prayed for because I was sick it didn't work out like I expected. Fifty yards into the walk home I was pulled up short with the first of a series of chest pains which were to recur until a heart attack three or four days later. If you take this passage simply and literally exactly as written, please do two things, one is switch off now and two is forgive me. But I cannot help but take a tin opener to a mighty can labelled WORMS inside my head. Worms, big fat pink ones, come writhing forth, all with questions written on them.

- (1) Did I not have sufficient faith?
- (2) Did they not have sufficient faith?
- (3) Did I have some unconfessed sin lurking?
- (4) Did they have some unconfessed sin lurking?
- (5) Was the fact that we did not actually use oil crucial?

See what I mean? The questions pile up and then a quiet voice in my ear whispers 'Pete, just don't go there....'. Maybe if I hadn't had a heart attack at the time and place that I did I would not have received the treatment that I did, and would not have been today. In fact I am still here, I still believe in Jesus, and believe that, as with the matter of the Second Coming, he has his hand on the strings that matter. If you want a systematic thought-out experientially-verified sermon on healing, ask someone else.

Back to James, now we do have a joined-up bit., From healing he moves on the power of prayer, and an example of the power of prayer with Elijah, back in the book of Kings. Elijah was man just like us...(the Message says 'human just like us, which is better) who prayed that it would not rain. And it didn't, for three and a half years. Actually, Kings does not say he prayed, it reads more like a prophecy.... It is a dramatic story that you probably know well, with Elijah standing alone, or alone-with-God (which is better) against Ahab and Jezebel and the Prophets of Baal. It ends, after that dramatic signs-and-wonders contest with the false prophets, with Elijah praying on top of Mount Carmel, 'bent down to the ground with his face between his knees', for rain, for the curse of drought to be lifted, and that little cloud 'as small as a man's hand' rising from the sea - and then the sky black with cloud and the long-overdue rain lashing down.

And here is a link up, I don't know whether James intended it, with the rain at the start of this passage. There the farmer is commended for patience in simply waiting for the seasonal rain. So we have patience, waiting for rain, then the power of prayer, in the bringing of rain. The tension between being rightly passive at one time and rightly active at another. There's another sermon starting here.... Just a brief word. A couple of times recently I have been back to our old church, from 20 odd years ago, in Sheffield. It is a complete contrast to Stepping Stones. Big, thriving, into all sorts of activities. Sheffield buses have adverts on the back showing several hip young people sitting on a sofa and the message 'we're going back to church...' Each time I go the sermon seems to be about things they are doing, a new project there, a new centre opening there, about how the staff are pulling strings that might change the future of the whole C of E. And country mouse sits on the back pew, thinking 'hey, I'm in a different world here'. To be honest, it is not a world I think I could return to, and if the debates in my head rage on too long I get the little voice again with its usual message 'don't go there'. Not my problem these days. But if they have dangers, I think we have them the other way. Perhaps our danger is with the passive, we take the message 'patience is great', hold on, it's God's ball game, resource each other to be Christians, live our lives in the secular world. We are not big enough, we are not expected to set up projects, or buy advertising space on the backs of buses. (Stepping Stones is Where it's At. Or a Stepping Stones Train out from Newcastle like the Station runs the Curry Train?). It's getting it right, isn't it. Again something I'm not good at,. Knowing when to wait for rain, or pray for rain.

The last bit. And right at the end of this 'right strawy epistle' it is the echoes of the brother's voice, Jesus again, or certainly Jesus' concerns. Rescuing the lost, the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, the Prodigal Son all over again. God's over-riding concern, actually the thing Jesus came for, and died for. Someone who has wandered from the Truth, is out-of-relationship with God. God knows we are prone to wandering, and he has done something about it. The whole Gospel is about an open door, music playing, the lit room, the feast prepared, the welcome home. It's not just a message for outsiders (any outsiders here?), it is for all of us, regardless of our current level-of-commitment, which departments of our lives are open or shut to God at the moment.

This is what James talks about, because it is what Jesus talked about, what Jesus was about, and what Jesus is about. And it is not just a was and an is, it is also a will be....