Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 23rd September 2018

James 3: 13 - 4: 3, 7-8a

One day this week, I realised that I have been a schoool teacher for 48 years. When I started I lived in the same community, where I taught. One of the things, I had to get used to was meeintg the children I taught out of school. I didn’t have a car so walking through the streets, going to the shops or waiting for a train. I saw them and they saw me. It was usually easy to recognise the younger ones out of school uniform. But it was not so easy with the older girls. No longer dressed in their drab black blazers and grey skirts, but heavily made up with trendy clothes , they were difficult to recognise at times. But on Monday mornings, they were back tot he old selves. The change had been only skin deep.

The christian faith is all about change. It is not concerned with superficial change, what we eat, what we wear, what we look like. It is about inner transformation.

In this morning`s bible reading from the book of James, the kind of change that James expected of his congregation is made clear.

First, he stressest the importance of the Christian character. He says, „ If anyone thinks he is wise and understanding, he is to prove it , by his good life and works that are done with gentleness born of wisdom.“ That sounds a bit abstract, but if you take time to read this short letter, it becomes abundantly clear that there are people in is congregation who think rather highly of themselves. And some of them have risen to prominence within the community. However, James thoguht they were lacking wisdom. Now, here is a word that has almost dropped out of use. But, if you go into anybook shop, you will a great many books that are about wisdom. You see wisdom is quite simply the abiity to make the right decisions in daily life. Our first reading from the book of Proverbs is a great example of this kind of writing. It is the last chapter of the book. The other 30 chapters are about very practical advice to young men. I read it as a young man and its powerful imagery kept me away from cigarettes and whisky and wild wild women. Which was no loss. But this last chapter, is about a woman who is wise. At first glance it seems very patriarchal, but when you see the things this woman does, she seems to live the kind of life that is so praised in our own day. She is a very successful business woman, who organises her domestic life with great skill and the help of many servants. She is intensely practical and hardworking but is not vain or selfish. She is not only aware of the poor, she is generous in her charity. As a result, she is loved and respected throughout the city. This is a woman who is praised and not put down. And why, she made the right decisions, and this was demonstrated by her service in her home and the wider community.

This desire to make the right decisions leading to serve is the hallmark of the Christian life. In the gospel reading, Jesus says to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be first, must be the last of all and servant of all.” Unfortunately, the history of the Christian church is marked by far too many occasions when ambition and intolerance were its key feature. It was certainly true of the congregation where James was working. He writes a powerful description of their bitter envy and selfish ambition, their boasting and deceit. He says this has led to disorder and wickedness of every kind, partiality and hypocrisy. In other words there was a great gap between what they said and what they did. They boasted of their wisdom, but their lack of humility, their overbearing selfish conceit told a very different story.

In our own day, the situation is not very different. The church has more than its fair share of pretend pastors and counterfeit Christians. Their words speak of one thing, but in their hearts and lives, there is a different story. Such people are a tragedy to themselves and to the church. They are devoid of the life of Christ. They have exchanged peace for bitter conflict, fellowship for fighting and gentleness for harsh words. Over their lives is a perpetual shadow that knows not the light of Christ.

The tragedy of their lives is compounded by their effect upon others. There are many people outside the church of god who would be worshipping this morning , if they had not be driven away from the church by counterfeit Christianity. How can you be drawn to worship when there is malice in the church? How can you continue to be a member of a community that turns it back on abuse and sweeps anything uncomfortable under the carpet? There is much amiss in the Church of Christ.

But what of us? Are we not also counterfeit Christians? I can only speak for myself. It is not my job to judge you or anyone else. I can only echo the words of St Paul. So often the good that I would do , I cannot do. There is a conflict constantly raging in me. I long to be a servant of Christ. I strive to be wise, but too often I fail in word and deed, by what I have done and left undone and there is no health in me. Why do I fail and mybe you do too.

We fail because we are constantly stalked by our enemy, the prince of darkness. Peter says he is like a roaring lion who lies beside our path, hoping to catch us unawares. He overcomes our minds and we are easily distracted by the modern idea of freedom. We want to follow our own desires to fulfil our own wishes and do not stop to think about others. If we are not careful, we turn our back upon our responsibilities to pamper our own wishes. What was once a great hobby or a refreshing change begins to take over to much of our lives. We are thinking too much about ourselves, to the detriment of our families, friends and also the church. Or when we come to church, we become contaminated by selfishness, envy and self-righteousness. We forget the whole point of being a Christian. As the last Pope, Benedict the 16th said, “Being Christian is not an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction. (*Deus Caritas Est.)*

So when we meet with Christ, through his Holy Spirit, he gives us a totally different kind of wisdom. This wisdom is pure, It is not self seeking, it is not destructive, but gives life. It leads us to be peaceful, gentle and supportive of one anther. Face with difficulties it does not rage at people, but seeks to understand them. It seeks their welfare and wants to draw alongside them. It is full of compassion and good deeds. Fort he rest of our lives we will battle daily between desire to please ourselves and our will to serve. It is our relationship with God and his people which will provide us with the progress that each of us needs to be authentic Christians - truly human – consistently caring – resolutely selfless.