

Trinity 15 2018

¹⁴ *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?* ¹⁵ *If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food,* ¹⁶ *and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill’, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?* ¹⁷ *So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*

The French Revolution was a watershed event in modern European history that began in 1789 and ended in the late 1790s with the rise to power of Napoleon Bonaparte. During this period, French citizens razed and redesigned their country’s political landscape, uprooting centuries-old institutions such as absolute monarchy and the feudal system. The upheaval was caused by widespread discontent with the French monarchy and the poor economic policies of King Louis XVI, who met his death by guillotine, as did his wife Marie Antoinette. Although it failed to achieve all of its goals and at times degenerated into a chaotic bloodbath, the French Revolution played a critical role in shaping modern nations by showing the world the power inherent in the will of the people.

The French revolutionary readers of James, if in fact there were any, would probably have balked at verse 8 of today’s reading;

“You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”.

I am sure that this verse would not have struck a chord with George Danton, Maximillian Robespierre, Jean Paul Marat or his assassin Charlotte Cordoray, who, if my memory serves me well, stabbed him to death in his bath.

On this subject, Ben Quash, who is Professor of Christianity and the Arts at King’s College, London, the author of the 2013 Lent book, *Abiding*, and Canon Theologian of both Bradford and Coventry cathedrals, reflects;

“The French revolutionary cry of “Liberty, Equality and Fraternity” seems unexpectedly to find a precursor here in the Letter of James. God in Christ, according to James, has called Christians to “the law of liberty”. What is the law of liberty? Is it to show no favouritism; to avoid making distinction on the grounds of wealth or social status; to put such distinctions away forever. Equality is its watchword; equality of regard. And what is to be the fruit of this equality of regard? Love and mercy. These create the special bond of Christian fellowship whose French revolutionary was fraternity.

Where the French Revolutionary would surely balk, however, would be in the claim that this “law of liberty” is also a “royal law”. What has royalty to do with such ideals? Why talk of kingship in the same breath as saying we must make no social distinctions?

Yet here is the secret: this is the true royalty that puts an end to all the most unjust or self-serving pretensions of earthly rule. It is not the royalty that the Judges in ancient Israel knew was a dangerous burden for the people to take upon themselves: a royalty so easily corrupted. It is the royalty that alone guarantees the mercy, the love, the freedom from favouritism that allows humans to flourish together, while even the most high-minded revolutionaries fall back into being victims of their own “evil thoughts”.”

In France, one of the most significant changes brought by the French Revolution was social reform. The Revolution stemmed from several primary causes, which were political, economic and social in nature. Prior to the Revolution, French citizens lived under the rule of oppressive regimes and rulers. France was controlled by an absolute monarchy in the years leading up to the Revolution, which vested power in the central government, giving rights and freedom to an elite few while depriving the masses of those same rights. Anger and resentment grew among French citizens: they had little land, high taxes and suffered from high rates of poverty, food scarcity and lack of basic supplies under the regime. Through a series of stages, citizens gained a better quality of life and more freedom; inspired by changes during the French Revolution, oppressed peoples in nations around the world, including Latin America and Russia, soon followed suit.

It could be argued that Israel, prior to Jesus, was in a similar state and ripe for revolutionary change. The Roman invaders were oppressive and unpopular. The religious institution was self-obsessed and had, by its own corruption, distanced itself from the man and woman in the Synagogue.

Then along came, what Ben Quash described as the, “*royalty of the crucified*”.

The French revolution was bloody and unsatisfactory but its changes were not everlasting. Inequality and social division are rife in modern France despite what they try to have you believe. The changes brought about by the greatest revolutionary of them all, Jesus, are long lasting because they are eternal. Many historians have viewed the French revolution as being the greatest historical vehicle of social change whilst others would say that it only led to social chaos.

As Ben Quash reminds us that James’ letter has called Christians to “*the law of liberty*”. James is challenging us to adopt a social gospel. He is asking us to

look at the causes of corruption and wrong in our society and world and to take them on. However, the revolution of James is a peaceful one, unlike the French revolution. Let me remind you where James is coming from;

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It is not a call to arms but a call to spiritual action and renewal. Faith is great but on its own it is not enough if not followed up by action. Let me leave you with the words of Jesus from Matthew 25 beginning at verse 31, which I hope will put it all into perspective;

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

When you go home take out your bible and carry on reading the rest of Matthew chapter 25 to discover the alternative, which is just as real for us today!

Amen.