

James 1.17-end; Mark 7.1-23

Our old, pot-holed street was resurfaced the other week.
If you've ever been at home when your street's been resurfaced,
you'll understand why I'm still needing to talk about it!
So much noise and disruption!
So many workers, machines and strange smells!
It's only a little street,
it was only the surface –
an inch or so deep –
but it took a whole week!
And then they came back
to paint the lines...

Do you know the one about the man
fired from the Council Highway Department?

He was hired
to paint the lines down the middle of the road.
The first day he painted fifteen miles of lines.
His boss – his line manager – was impressed.
But the next day he painted six miles.
The following day he did two.
And on the fourth day he only managed half a mile.

His boss was furious
at the man's shocking falling standards
and had no choice but to fire him.

But he was also confused.
"How on earth did you only manage
to paint half a mile the last day?"
he asked.

"Well," the man replied,
"I just kept getting
further and further away from the paint pot."

Our bible readings today
are all about warning us of the dangers
of getting further and further away
from the paint pot -
further and further away
from the way, the truth and the life
at the heart of our faith.

Jesus himself speaks directly to his disciples
about the dangers of foolish preoccupation
with peripheral religious traditions
and outward appearance,
whilst neglecting God at the centre,
the Spirit at the heart of it all;
remembering to keep the outside clean,
but forgetting it's what's inside that matters.

And Jesus warns
that if your life stops bearing the fruit of the Spirit,
it will begin bearing a different kind of fruit,
a dangerous fruit,
germinating, growing, ripening
in the perfect growing conditions of self-centredness.

And the Letter of James
speaks of a very similar thing
in a slightly different way.

Rather than painting a picture
of people preoccupied
with the externals of bright, shiny, sanitised hands
but whose inner lives bearing the fruit of evil intention;
James paints a picture
of people whose ears hear the Word of God,
but whose lives don't reflect it.

He paints a picture
of people remembering to look into the mirror,
but immediately forgetting what they've seen.

Whilst some of us wish we could,
James' point is about people
who have begun
to follow the way,
to learn the truth
and to live the life,
but who then all too quickly and all too easily
begin to lose their way,
begin to forget the truth,
begin to die.

The wise road line painter
Would of course have carried his paint pot with him
and dipped his brush regularly
into the fresh wet paint.
The foolish road line painter didn't.

Both the letter of James
and Jesus himself
warn us today
of the very real dangers
of getting further and further away from the pot
and they encourage us all
to hear the Word afresh,
and to do what the Word inspires:
to be letting that Word sink deep
and be bearing heavenly fruit here on earth,
which is love, joy and peace.

They both teach and encourage us
to look beneath the surface,
to let our religion run deep,
to let God take us deeper.

And Church is here to help us!
And we're all here to help each other!

Because what God, James and Jesus
are all trying to convey today,
is the simple truth
that unless we remember
we will forget!

Unless day by day and moment and by moment
we pause and reflect, ponder and pray,
we will bluster our way through each moment and day
guided by nothing other
than the fading memory of religious wishful thinking,
and our own ungracious habits and concerns –
forgetting the guidance and grace of God's living Spirit,
the paintpot come among us, with us step by step.

We need to keep in touch
with the reality of God's presence
and the truth of God's love –
for ourselves and for one another,
and for the sake of this precious world we're wasting,
however we do it,
in whatever way works for us.

No two road line painters are the same.
And even the way you paint *your* road today
will be different from the way you painted it before.
But in the changing light and shade of our lives,
with all their shifting textures
and on whatever particular canvas we find ourselves at any particular time,
God has a picture to paint
and you're the brush of God's choosing:
no one else will apply that colour quite like you;
no one else achieve that particular effect God has in mind.

Going beneath the surface,
caring for the orphan and the widow,
will look different in your life here in Swanscombe,
than in my life down the road.
Different from both of us again
will be God's brushwork
in the lives of those whose paths we cross.

As we look beneath the surface of our own religious lives,
we notice hidden depths –
light and shade –
in others,
as well as in our ourselves.

And the way we notice makes a difference.

At Bluewater,
and in workplaces across Kent,
our chaplains have the enormous privilege and responsibility
of being there to notice.

To notice the light and shade of people's daily working lives.
To pay attention to how they're doing.
And – if invited – to go beneath the surface with them.

Perhaps just to listen and to care when it feels like noone does.
Perhaps to comfort and to console.
Perhaps to help them find their way through those times and places
when the road markings are faded and too hard to read
or just don't make much sense.
Perhaps sometimes to take the lid from off the paintpot and to share.
Perhaps sometimes just to know it's there.

We have our training, our guidelines, our agreements.
We support each other,
and encourage others to join us in the work.
But it's not really rocket science.

It's just the deep, authentic, inward-looking,
living kind of faith that Jesus calls us to,
just the deep, authentic, outward-looking,
living kind of faith James has in mind for us.

Workplace chaplaincy offers one way
for some us
to respond to the challenge and encouragement
of today's scriptures,
to the challenge and encouragement
of God's eternal call.

We are not all called to be the same kind of brush.

But we are all called:

to be exploring beneath the surface of our faith;

to be nourishing and nurturing,
noticing and attending to
the Word within our lives,
and within the lives of those amongst whom we live and work.

We are all called:
to be bearing fruit;
to be hearing and doing;
to be remembering and not forgetting.

Remembering and not forgetting
that God's presence and God's love
are come among us,
and are with us and within us,
for us to open our hearts, our minds and our lives to,
as step by step
we paint our way
down whatever road we're led to follow,
across whoever's path we're called to cross.

Remembering and not forgetting
that when we were baptised,
dipped in the fresh wet waters of the font,
we were washed *inside out* and *for ever*.

Remembering and not forgetting:

to daily dip our brushes deep
into the fresh wet paint
of God's abiding presence
and of God's eternal love;

to brush up on what our religion's really all about,
to let it be more than superficial, more than just inch-deep,
and let ourselves become the brush God needs us be;

to notice and join in
the painting of God's great work of art
in our own lives,
and in our only world,
in rich, deep shades
of love and joy and peace.

Amen.