

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

2nd September 2012

Song of Solomon 2: 8 – 13, Psalm 45, James 1: 17-27, Mark 7:1-8,14-23

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Today's readings are very much 'in order', and the first from the Song of Solomon gives a delightfully poetic glimpse of "*the voice of my beloved*", and perhaps asks us to contemplate for ourselves a knowing of the place in which we can also hear "*the voice of my beloved*". We might also go further and seek to identify that voice speaking from within, a voice 'of you' that is also speaking 'to you'. Can we identify within ourselves an asking, from within, an asking, or desire of ourselves that calls us to, "*Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away*".

Following the contemplative poetry of the first reading the Psalm seems to speak from that very same place and affirms for us that; "*[y]our God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness*". We have each and all received an anointing of "*the voice of my beloved*".

The reading from James then gives us a delightful outworking of our knowing the "*the voice of my beloved*".
James says, right at the beginning that "*Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above*". When we engage in the "*generous act of giving*" we echo the Divine voice, the voice of our beloved. In the activity of 'giving' and 'receiving' we encounter and we participate in the activity of God (the Divine). James provides us with a beautifully succinct appreciation of who we are, and of the relationship we have with God. He writes: "*In fulfilment of his own purpose*", that is, God in fulfilling God's self "*gave us birth by the word of truth*". This gives us, and certainly James' initial readers, a new and different perspective on the Creator/Creature relationship. Our birth, the genesis of our very being is God's giving "*birth by the word of truth*". The "*voice of my beloved*" is the very gift that is our birth and our creation. Made in the image of God, we are birthed in, and with, the voice of God – the gift from where all giving originates.

Having opened for us this understanding of ourselves, verse 19 onwards gives us advice or reference points to enable us to see when we ourselves give voice to the Divine that is gifted and birthed within. These reference points help us to appreciate our truth, or our being with a Divine orientation:

"be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger"
"welcome with meekness the implanted word"
"be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves".

And it is the last of these reference points, *"be doers of the word, and not merely hearers",* that James dwells on for the next five verses. And perhaps that's where we might dwell, and consider our own part in giving voice to the Divine that is implanted in us, each and all, individually and together, as church community.

James is quite boldly critical of 'religion'; he speaks of those who "*think they are religious*", those who "*deceive their hearts*", those who "*do not bridle their tongues*". It sounds like he is talking about the Australian Christian Lobby! Maybe he is addressing us - a part of us, or some of us, and perhaps some part of each one of us. To help us identify this "*religion [that] is worthless*", he identifies for us a "*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God";* in verse 27 we hear that this pure and undefiled way of being is a call to serve; "*to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world*".

Here James has identified for us the very activity of God; it is the activity of Just Manna, the activity of In Giving We Receive, of pastoral Care, and the activity of the many vocational and community giving activities that we are collectively engaged in, both as part of St Paul's and also in the many work places and social contexts that we all participate in. When we give voice to "*the voice of my beloved*" we are giving of ourselves in service to the whole, echoing the giving of God-self into the wholeness of humanity. And so we are called to keep ourselves "*unstained by the world*"; we are called to an orientation that is not achieved by our church membership, as we have to be aware of "*religion [that] is worthless*", rather our orientation is made real by our being "*doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves".*

James asks us to be imitators of Christ, to be a voice in the wilderness as make manifest the voice of the beloved in a stained world. James calls us into an integrity of being that is birthed in the Divine Word, "*the voice of my beloved*"; and that speaks of a movement away from the worldly gravity that pulls us into a smaller reality. it is a movement that is creative of movement:

from Competition toward Cooperation
from Accumulating toward Giving
from Hostility toward Hospitality
from Rejection to Embracing
from Exclusion to Inclusion
from Discriminating to Honouring
and from Self-sufficiency to Sharing.

Obviously this is not a one-off conversion, nor is it a Sunday morning activity, and it is not something we've already accomplished for we've not yet reached the seventh day of our creation. So each and all of us can seek in every moment to regain our original voice, "*the voice of my beloved*".

The writings of James, and also of Mark, are not given to us in the form of criticism, rather they are provided as an inspiration; urging us toward a fullness of life that is lived and alive in the image of the Divine. The questioning in Mark's gospel between the Pharisees and Jesus is a questioning of the religious order. It is a questioning of orthodoxy, tradition, religious practice, attitude and perspective. It is for us a questioning between religion that is worthless and "*the voice of my beloved*". It is a call to look again at the outworking of the "*implanted word"* of God in us and within the whole of humanity. The questioning of religious practice opened the way for a new movement, a new direction that went beyond the Hebrew tradition; this new movement was the Church. Yet, by mid-to-late third century we have James seeking that movement over again. James is calling into question all that Christ called into question, and that too is our opportunity in the present. In the Gospel today Jesus says:

“This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; 7 in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' 8 You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."
These words might also be addressed to us in the present, and they can therefore inspire us to look again at what is “worthless” and to seek a path that is pure, undefiled and unstained by the world, a path that will lead us toward fullness of life.

The Lord be with you
Peter Humphris