Sermon for 22nd in Ordinary Year B

Readings: James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

i

In our reading today from the *Epistle of James*, scripture is compared to a mirror:

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do as it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like (James 1:22-23).

Both the written word of scripture and the preached word should hold up a mirror to us so that we can see the true state of our lives. For when we look at ourselves in the mirror, which reveals every blemish and wrinkle, we are reminded of what we truly look like, rather than live with the image of what we think we look like which we carry around in our head.

When we stare into a mirror we are drawn deeper into ourselves; it has a hypnotic effect and for this reason there is a long tradition of linking mirrors with the human soul. Looking into a mirror can be a portal into another world – as it was for Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*.

The idea that staring into a mirror connects you with your soul lies behind the Victorian tradition of covering all the mirrors in a house between a death in the family and a funeral, a hangover of earlier times when people feared a person’s spirit might hang around the place and live in the mirror waiting for someone to look in and so take possession of them.

The connection of mirrors with souls is also why vampires are supposed to have no reflection and it is also why breaking a mirror is supposed to bring seven years of bad luck.

Clearly this link goes back a long way, for we find it in several parts of the Bible. We have the example we have heard today from the *Epistle of James*, elsewhere St Paul speaks of seeing God only darkly as in a glass or mirror, but one day we shall see God face to face (1 Cor 13:12).

Clement of Rome, writing a few years later said; “Through Jesus we see as in a mirror the spotless and most excellent face of God.” And in the 4th Century, St Athanasius spoke of the *Book of Psalms* in a similar way, saying the psalms are “like a mirror, in which we can see oneself and the movements of one’s own heart.”

And St Claire writing in the 12th Century said:

“Place your mind before the mirror of eternity! Place your soul in the brilliance of glory. Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance. And transform your whole life being into the image of the Godhead itself through contemplation.”

St Augustine in the 4th/5th Century says a person’s soul can become a mirror reflecting the beauty of God (*De Trinitate XV, 20,39).*

From these various quotes we can see three distinct ways in which the imagery of the mirror is being used: Firstly – scripture is a mirror in which we glimpse God; secondly, scripture is a mirror in which we glimpse ourselves; thirdly, we too can become mirrors to reflect God’s holiness.

ii

It is often said that Christians do not worship a book, the written Word of God, but worship the Living Word, Jesus Christ. Christians revere their holy book, but that is not in the same way as some Jews revered the Torah, or some Muslims view the Koran. The Bible for Christians is the supreme authority of faith and doctrine, but only to the extent that it gives authentic and true witness to the work of God down the ages and supremely to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Living Word. How we interpret the biblical witness is guided through the ages by the Church and that is as true of modern, independent evangelical churches as the historic traditions of Christendom.

All traditions have their own ‘purple passages’ and all church traditions draw their own distinctions for their adherents between what is considered historic truth, legal code, parable, metaphor and poetic hymn or prayer. We may differ between us where we draw those demarcation lines, but we are all united in the understanding that we need to make such distinctions.

I have a well-worn Bible on my desk and the dirty finger marks discolouring the pages reveal my own conscious and unconscious demarcation lines. My Bible betrays that I use the NT far more than parts of the OT. It reveals that I use the gospels and Paul rather more than the ‘catholic epistles’ and that I rarely look at Leviticus. Indeed, there are things I have barely read in Leviticus, yet taken as a whole, the Bible remains for me the supreme source of Christian faith and practice, although my understanding has been gained through the medium of my Methodist tradition and the universities at which I have studied or taught.

Despite the differences among the Christian family about many of the details, we hold in common the belief that by studying the scriptures we gain a glimpse into the very nature and purpose of God. Scripture is not the same as beholding God face to face; it has all sorts of culturally specific material bound in time to the particular age from which that portion of scripture emanates, but by careful, thoughtful reading and guided by those who have gone before me, I can read the scriptures and get a glimpse of God’s reflection.

As Clement of Rome said, only in Jesus do we see a true reflection of ‘the spotless and most excellent face of God’.

iii

The second sense in which scripture acts as a mirror is that in it we can see our own reflection.

St Athanasius saw the psalms in this way. Perhaps you have read the psalms and sometimes wondered about all those less than Christian passages that gloat over the suffering of God’s enemies, perhaps you have gagged over some of the self-righteousness, or winced at some of the whining and pleading.

Wesley edited the psalms for his Methodist followers to cut out some of the unsavoury passages. Even in modern Methodist hymn books such as the British *Hymns & Psalms*, published in 1983, we still have a highly edited selection of psalms.

St Athanasius saw the psalms and their mixture of praise and thanksgiving with anger, envy, pride and other less wholesome expressions of human emotions as being a mirror of our own human souls. What we find in the psalms reflects what we find in our own hearts.

Such scriptures are not there to condone our sins, but to help us recognise them and amend them. In this sense scripture acts as a mirror we hold up to ourselves. This is the sense in which St James speaks in today’s first reading. If we don’t heed what we read and hear in the word of God, it is like looking in a mirror and then forgetting what we look like.

St Augustine made the same point in 4th/5th century when he also said scripture acted like a mirror:

See if you are who He says you are. If you are not yet so, pray that you may be…

Many forms of self-examination are based on a thoughtful contemplation of scripture, but it takes time and time seems to be in such short supply in our lives today. We must resist the temptation to always be too busy to give time to searching the scriptures for self-enlightenment. In early Methodism, such searching of the scriptures to promote holy living was done in small groups known as the Class Meeting, and for advanced seekers of the truth, the Band Meeting.

Methodism is a pale reflection of its former self since we all became too busy for such things.

iv

Lastly, we are called to become like mirrors ourselves to reflect the love of God in the world. The image of the soul being like a mirror is particularly strong in the eastern traditions of the Church. The power of the image underscores the fact that we participate in God through faith in the power of the Holy Spirit, but never does any of the glory emanate from us – it is all God’s glory which is reflected either well or poorly through us to be the light of the world.

How well we take the first two ideas of contemplating scripture to see a reflection of God’s nature and a reflection of our own imperfect but transforming soul as it changes by grace ‘from one degree of glory to another’ (2 Cor 3:8) is of great importance. For only if we give time and effort to the first two, will we achieve any progress in the third sense of polishing our own souls to become, by God’s grace at work in us, better mirrors of God’s glory and better reflections of the light of the gospel.

And how our world needs Christians who are capable of reflecting that light in today’s gathering gloom.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard. November 2017.**