

Hinde Street Methodist Church
8th November 2020
Rev Peter Cornick

Remembrance:

a legacy of selfish ambition; a promise of peace-making
Written in the light of the U.S. Presidential elections 2020,
where Joe Biden had recently been elected.
Based on James 3:13-18 & Psalm 121

A well-known commentator speaks about elections and democracy – and the threat to democracy when leaders become consumed by selfish ambition.

He writes:

'Revolutions in constitutions take place, even without factious strife, owing to election intrigue ... and also owing to carelessness, when people allow men (sic) that are not friends of the constitution to enter into sovereign office'. (Aristotle Politics 1303a14)

A desire to overturn the democratic constitution? Election intrigue? The electorate carelessly returning to office candidates who would disregard the constitutional will of the people? Who could this writer possibly be referring to?

Well, Aristotle in his book, *Politics*, warns the Greeks, about leaders who think nothing of employing the dark arts of electioneering, for the purpose of clinging onto power. He speaks of those who stoke division to promote their own selfish ambition. All of this, 400 or so years before Christ.

But I don't choose this quotation from Aristotle casually. When he says that 'election intrigue' causes democracy harm, Aristotle chooses a particular word. The word used is *eritheia*. And that word has a political meaning. It means, selfish ambition gained by 'election intrigue'; factionalism; disorder.

James uses the same, unusual word, *eritheia*.

¹⁶ For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.

Where there is a pursuit of power, by manipulating the democratic process, one sees selfish ambition. And it leads to disorder.

It is 75 years since the ending of the second world war. Aristotle, in his writing, might have been referring to a populist leader of the time, carelessly elected by the people in the wake of economic ruin. He set about a revolution of the reasonable constitution. He developed a dictatorship which wreaked chaos and misery on the world, based on envy and selfish ambition, and creating division within society – not least with a systematic programme of anti-Semitism. Across the whole war, 70-85 million killed.

¹⁵ Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish.

I remember a soldier telling me, that he was one of the first liberators into Belsen – he was crying as he spoke and couldn't go on.

I remember another soldier telling me, how he lost his hearing when a tank rolled over his trench. His comrades were crushed.

I remember standing on a Normandy beach in bright sunlight, realising that if one landed there, under fire, there was simply nowhere to take cover.

I remember another soldier telling me, how those that pushed on through Normandy and thought the way would be clear, were ambushed on the narrow road.

I remember standing in silence with veterans, knowing that far from glorifying war, or seeking selfish ambition, not a day had gone by without them remembering those who never came back.

Disorder and wickedness of every kind. The consequence of war.

Rowan Williams observes that those who returned from the trenches of the first world war, came back with no words to vocalise the horror. But they were met with a language of glory and chivalry which made no sense to them. Even the cenotaph declares it is for the 'glorious dead'.

'Real heroism', he writes, 'had a great deal more to do with endurance, loyalty and the daily struggle to retain integrity and humanity in the midst of unspeakably awful conditions.

By the time of the second world war, there was a sense of sober reality. The only justification for the loss was to restrain a worse evil. Archbishop William Temple wrote:

'We recognise this is all to do with the sin in which we're all implicated so that the best thing we can do is still a bad thing.'

(Rowan Williams in *The Bright Field*, London, 2014 p241-242)

Today is a day to remember. To remember that, as James says, bitterness, envy, selfish ambition, boastfulness and abandoning the truth, can lead to horrific consequences. Aristotle reminds us that it is the people's carelessness – who we elect – that gives permission for such ideas to gain a voice. Today is a day to remember those whose lives were blighted by memory or injury – whether military or civilian. To remember, whether from world wars or the from many conflicts since, those who never came back.

¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

The somewhat scaled down Festival of Remembrance last night, highlighted the way in which the armed services have helped, supporting the frontline in the coronavirus pandemic. We saw military medical staff supporting NHS health care workers; helicopter pilots transferring patients from remote locations to hospital whether in the UK or abroad; drivers driving huge army trucks transporting ventilators; engineers building the Nightingale Hospitals. The personnel who spoke, clearly derived a sense of pride that they had saved lives and done their bit. The armed services; peaceable; gentle; bearing good fruits.

¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

James has contrasted in his message, selfish ambition, leading to disorder, with peaceable mercy, without a trace of partiality, leading to peace.

I am reminded of the famous words of the beatitudes, which we heard last week. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God. It is in the act of making peace, that people become children of God. In the act of peace-making, that a harvest of righteousness is sown.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. It is in the act of mourning; in the act of comforting – in the very remembering – that God is to be found. We will remember them.

It is interesting that in his writing, James is using language which refers to the selfish ambition played out in political intrigue. He was not referring to war – I have taken James' general point and applied it to a specific context. James was writing to the church. Did he perceive that there might be envy and selfish ambition – even played out in political intrigue within the church? Don't forget, this is the same writer who warned against the uncontrolled tongue – gossip. And don't tell me you've never heard gossip in the church.

But surely, the church is the place where the fruit of the Spirit is found, peace, faithfulness, mercy and so on. Yes, it is. But remember, the church is made up of people and if we know anything from Genesis and beyond, people are prone to sin. They tend to want to get their own way. Why is it that the Methodist Conference published a leaflet entitled Working Positively Together? It is because in churches across the Connexion, people report being shouted at if there is disagreement, or belittled by words used or being subjected to false statements.

It is no good us celebrating a U.S. President elect who we believe will bring reason and tolerance, and celebrating a U.S. Vice President elect who is both female and black, who we believe will contribute to unity and inclusion, if we do not listen to James.

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.

¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Peace-making, is surely blessed – the place and moment when God breaks in and the Spirit's breath is felt. Sowing peace, begins not in the Whitehouse, but here, in our church – in your home.

Sometimes though, 'the *best* thing we can do is still a *bad* thing' to quote the Archbishop of Canterbury at the beginning of the second world war. And the course of seeking justice brings about terrible suffering.

Selfish ambition, that word used by both Aristotle and James – *eritheia* – selfish ambition of individuals, societies, nations, leads to disorder and wickedness of every kind.

Whilst we commit ourselves once again to the cause of peace-making, we remember that some have shown the ultimate self-giving in the course of duty. Today, we remember their sacrifice.

I lift up my eyes to the hills—

from where will my help come?

My help comes from the Lord,

who made heaven and earth.

The Lord will keep you from all evil;

he will keep your life.

The Lord will keep

your going out and your coming in

from this time on and for evermore.

We will remember them.