

Bible Notes – James 4

James 4:4 is startlingly blunt: ‘Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.’

It’s important to remember when interpreting this verse that in the Bible ‘world’ is often not a neutral term, simply describing our planet and its cultures. No, ‘world’ carries the sense of ‘human society organised on the basis of either forgetfulness of or opposition to God.’

‘World’ then is not a synonym for ‘creation’: creation is good and beloved of God, and to be ‘friends’ with creation is entirely right and proper. But to be a friend of the *world* necessarily involves sharing in its alienation from God. It is in this sense that every candidate for baptism is charged to ‘fight valiantly against sin, the world, and the devil.’

In James’ mind, what characterises the ‘world’ is above all the pursuit of self-interest. It is greed of all sorts, he says, which fuels conflict between human beings – whether that is at the level of international conflicts over economic resources, or whether it might be the much smaller but perhaps equally vicious conflicts between two individuals over who wins various social games of success, popularity and group esteem. You can spot the mentality of the world whenever people are concerned above all with protecting and advancing their own interests, whatever those may be. Hence James’ emphasis in this chapter on the contrasting value of humility: the Christian must be specially alert to their fallibility and sinfulness (vv.8-10) and mindful of their mortality (vv.14-15). Remembering quite how small and fragile we are is the medicine against the vaunting of self.

So far, so arguably sensible. However, there is also a great danger in the principle that ‘whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God’ – or at least, in how that principle is commonly understood within the church. This has been very apparent, for instance, in the church’s discussion about how it should approach same-sex relationships. At the heart of the opposition of many conservative Christians to any revision of traditional doctrine and practice in this area is the fear that this is an example of the church just

accommodating itself to what the world wants, regardless of what the Bible or Christian tradition might have to say. It is certainly undeniably true that it takes a great deal of courage to assert the traditional position today, not only in the wider culture but even in the church. To do so is to face being denounced as an unloving, bigoted, homophobic, stupid and dangerous person. By contrast, it is easy to gain the applause of the world by trumpeting one's liberal credentials on questions of sexuality: everyone loves the leader prepared to face down the bigots and to champion love and inclusiveness.

In such a climate, a conservative reading James 4 is almost bound to see in it a vindication of his position – that the world is united furiously against you must be a sign that you are, after all, on the right moral track. And it's true that the Church should indeed be cautious, perhaps even suspicious, about the (im)moral enthusiasms of the world – we are not to get our ethics from the opinion polls. *But* the tricky and important thing is to be able to hold that important truth in tension with another one: that the world isn't *always* wrong. Indeed, on occasion, it seems that the world has been well ahead of the church in securing goods which the church now enthusiastically applauds. It was secular people, for instance, who took much of the lead in advancing equal political rights for women, or the abolition of the death penalty – the church was very much in the slow lane on such questions, and many Christians viewed the pressure to change their stance as another lamentable example of conformity with 'the world.'

There are two important theological questions underlying all this, or perhaps one double-edged one. First, is the church sufficiently alert to its own sinfulness – its own ability to get things spectacularly wrong, intellectually and morally? Secondly, is the church sufficiently alert to the possibility (let's put it no more strongly than that) that on occasion, God might choose to speak through 'the world' – through secular people, even through the opponents of the church? If all one ever read was James 4, that possibility would be closed off – and yet it is worth remembering that there is another strand in Christian theology (taking its cue from texts such as Acts 17:22-28, Romans 2:12-16 and John 1:9) which says that even though the world's knowledge of God may be marred and uncertain, it is still real. If that is so, the world may on occasion have something to teach the church. Discerning when that might be requires the kind of wisdom that James is all about growing.