

Sermon

21 September 2014

West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

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Text: James 4:13-17

Baptism

Today is the 21st of September. Have any of you been in the shops lately? As far as I can remember Christmas is on the 25th of *December* – but the shelves are already filled with Christmas goodies! Why? Because time flies. In the blink of an eye these 3 months are going to be over and it will be Christmas, and the people in the retail industry knows this very well and they want to make the best of it.

And good on them for realising that! Even though it just doesn't feel right to see Christmas things in the shops already, one thing we will never be able to say about the people in the retail business, is that they let opportunities pass them by!

Life is short, and the sooner we realise that, the better we can handle it.

James says: "What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes."

Life is short. On the 17th of July this year, 298 people got on board Air Malaysia, flight MH17. Some of them on their way home, some working, some going on holiday, some super excited about the time ahead of them, some just tired and wanting to sleep in their own beds again. Some people were there in their business suits, making last minute phone calls before the plane departed, others kissed their families goodbye at the airport – saying “see you when we get back!”, while still others phoned on ahead and said “see you in a few hours, we’re boarding!”. But none of this happened, because the plane was shot down and everybody on board died. What was just an ordinary day for all those people, turned out to be their last.

Our lives here on earth are like mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. And there is nothing that makes us understand this better than a sad sad tragedy like the one that happened to all the people on board flight MH17.

James has advice for us about this. He says: “Now listen, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money’. Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow...Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.’”

In Biblical times the people didn’t have shops like we have today. The merchants travelled around from city to city to sell their goods. But travelling in those days was a completely different story from today. With no cars, trains or aeroplanes to their disposal, they had no choice but to travel on foot. If they were lucky they had a donkey or two to help them carry the goods they were selling. Apart from the fact that this was very

time consuming, it was also dangerous – because the hot Palestinian sun gave many a traveller sunstroke. In the bigger cities there would be dirt roads, but in the rural areas sometimes there were no roads at all, so wild animals was a huge threat to travellers, and then of course they always had to be on the lookout for thugs who wouldn't think twice about killing them to steal their goods. Sometimes they also travelled by boat, but boats only went on sea certain times of the year, and took forever to reach their destination. Lots of people were killed by storms on the open waters or by diseases contracted on the ships.

But despite the fact that these merchants *knew* how dangerous and difficult it was to travel, they boasted that they *were going to go here or there* and make lots of money.

James found their attitude arrogant. He proposed that they rather say, “If it's the Lord's will, we will do this or that” – because nobody knows what lies ahead of them.

And to endeavour to go on any kind of a journey without God, is just silly – life is very short – you can just as well spend the little time you have here on earth well, *live your life right* – in close relation with God.

Why? Because then you will be able to make the most of your time here on earth. People who realise that they are dependent on God, approach life differently than people who think they are dependent on nobody but themselves.

And then James ends this passage with the words: “Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.”

People often ask me: “Is *this* or *that* a sin? Am I sinning if I do *this* or *that*?” But there isn’t a list somewhere of things that are sins and things that aren’t. You sin if you *know* what the right thing is to do, and then you don’t do it.

We know that we are supposed to put our lives, our future, in God’s hands. We know that we should have a relationship with God and trust in him. We *know* these things, so we *should do* these things.

It’s very straight forward. It’s not the words that are important, but the attitude behind the words. It’s no use if we only say “*If it’s the Lord’s will, I will do this or that*”, we should really mean it.

So does this mean we shouldn’t plan anything? Of course not! It only means that we should make our plans in accordance to God’s will. Which in turn means that if things don’t work out exactly the way we planned, we’ll accept that and understand that maybe God wants something different for us. But also that if our plans worked out the way we hoped it would, we’d be thankful and praise God for it.

The closer we live to God, the easier it will be for us to know what his will for our lives is.

But one thing that stands out in the letter James wrote, as well as in the rest of the Bible, is that God wants us to make the most of life here on earth, He doesn’t want us to waste a second.

He wants us to get up in the morning and seize the day – every single day of our lives. If we see someone struggling with something, we should offer our help. If we hear someone crying, we should offer our

shoulder, if we know someone is lonely, we should visit them – often. If we're upset about something, we should sort it out. If we miss someone, we should call them. If we hurt someone, we should apologise. If someone's hurt us, we should forgive them. And we should do all these things NOW – because we might not have a tomorrow to do it in.

The people of flight MH17 definitely didn't. Just imagine if you got on that flight and you thought – I'll straighten things out with my mum / dad / husband / friend when I land tomorrow...

We should never put off doing things, because we don't know if we'll have a tomorrow.

(So – you have put wee life in the hands of God this morning. Live your lives in such a way that he, and, will be able to learn from your example. That your 2 boys will make the most out of life, because you make the most out of life; that your 2 boys will want to live in relationship with God, because you live in relationship with God.)

If you know what the right thing is to do and you don't do it, we'll, then you are sinning...

A life lived in relationship with God, is a life worth living, no matter how long or short it is.

When the late Nadine Stair of Louisville, Kentucky, at 85 years of age, was asked what she would do if she had her life to live over again, she made the following, now very famous, statement:

"I'd make more mistakes next time," she said. "I'd relax. I would limber up. I would be sillier than I have been on this trip. I would take fewer things seriously. I would take more chances. I would climb more mountains and swim more rivers. I would eat more ice cream and less beans. I would perhaps have more actual troubles, but I'd have fewer imaginary ones.

You see, I'm one of those people who live sensibly and sanely hour after hour, day after day. Oh, I've had my moments, and if I had to do it over again, I'd have more of them. In fact, I'd try to have nothing else. Just moments, one after another, instead of living so many years ahead of each day. I've been one of those persons who never goes anywhere without a thermometer, a hot water bottle, and a raincoat. If I had to do it over again, I would travel lighter than I have.

If I had my life to live over, I would start barefoot earlier in the spring and stay that way later in the fall. I would go to more dances. I would ride more merry-go-rounds and I would pick more daisies."

But not Nadine Stair, nor anybody else, gets to live their live all over again. So let's make the most of it *now*, while we still can.

Amen