

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

I have a question for you, and I want your very honest answers, if you're willing to share.

Why are you at church on a Sunday morning? Why are you here?

Here's a reason that is true for all of us, but we probably won't like it. We are here because our hearts are corroded.

Wait, what? Surely we're here because our hearts are full of faith and we know we are loved?! Well, hopefully that is also true, but the fundamental reason that church exists and that Jesus came in the first place is that we all suffer from crappy hearts. Unfortunately it's an inescapable side effect of being human.

'Well my heart is nice' I hear you think to yourself. 'I'm actually naturally a good person'. And to be sure, I think we'd all like to believe that about ourselves, and even about each other. Episcopalians are very nice people! But I'm afraid even Episcopalians still need Jesus, because every single one of us has a dark side.

I wonder how uncomfortable that idea makes you, that we are all capable of being truly awful? I think we like to internalise this idea that there are good people and bad people, and we, by nature or nurture or both, are on team Good. If we lived in the Star Wars universe, none of us would have red lightsabers - they'd all be a friendly blue or green (or purple if you are super cool!).

But it just isn't true. We aren't good. We might try really hard, we might be well practised at behaving in acceptable and pleasant ways, we know how to be nice in all sorts of situations, but the fact remains that the human heart, no matter who it belongs to, harbours darkness within it. Really dark darkness. And yes, that includes you.

The fact is that we have to learn to be generous and kind and considerate. We see it in little ways all the time. A child behaves wrongly to another, and is told to apologise. "Sorry" they say, rolling their eyes. The next step is to encourage reflection, to talk about why they need to actually REALLY be sorry, and why it's important to apologise sincerely.

It's a small everyday example, but it highlights a point, that the human heart has some problems. And those problems are deep rooted and serious.

In the movie *Revenge of the Sith*, Emperor Palpatine encourages Anakin to give in to the Dark Side of the force, claiming that anger, rage and hatred are stronger than love and forgiveness. If Anakin just embraces the dark side, he will find the power he seeks. And it's true that anger and hatred can be very powerful. We know that in real life. We see it around us. It is in violence and politics and prisons and schools and social media and the news. The human heart is full of darkness, and it spills out into long shadows that lie over our world.

There are also plenty of people who claim to act in the name of God but use the bible and faith as a weapon, wounding others with anger and 'religion'. But this is not Christianity. This is not what Jesus teaches. Anger and hostility are not about God's love, but are antithetical to life. James puts it bluntly in his letter. 'Your anger does not produce God's righteousness'.

But there is a better way. It's a huge step in the right direction to be here this morning. We are here because we know that the Sith are wrong, and our hearts need

turning from the darkness to the light. It's really tempting to give in to the pull of anger sometimes, to fire back at everything that annoys us. It's so natural to let the road rage swell within you, to shout at the idiot on tv, or to write someone off when they're annoying. We slip into these things without even thinking about it, because it's the way our hearts naturally incline. To go the opposite way takes effort. To change the heart is a lifelong quest that we are embarked on.

But we know it's worth it. We know that the light is more powerful, because on Easter Day Jesus rose from the dead. All the anger and violence poured upon him didn't have the last word. So instead we worship the Father of lights, the one who gives life itself, the one who models forgiveness and grace, and we do our very best to follow in his footsteps.

So why church? Why are you here this morning?

I suggest to you that a faith community is one of the best things you can steep yourself in, because we need to learn and practise the way of light and love, and the best way to continue to learn and practise is among each other. Now it's true, we might drive each other crazy at times, and since we aren't perfect we will make

mistakes, but this is great - we can practise patience and forgiveness on each other! Seriously though, being part of a consistent family who can encourage and nurture each other will make all the difference in our growing as children of the light.

We can practise by consciously turning away from that burst of anger when it rises up. We always have a choice in how we act, if we're aware of ourselves enough to see what we're doing, and change tack before responding negatively. But I won't pretend it's easy! It's challenging because it goes to our hearts, our roots, the depths of ourselves that give away who we really are.

To change our corroded hearts is nothing short of a miracle, but the great news is that God is working on it, and with the help of God we can do it.

So listen! This faith is about how we act, especially when it is difficult. It's about how we resist the temptations to give into anger, especially the temptation to reciprocate what we encounter day to day.

We CAN embody the perfect gifts of God in action, in listening carefully to each other's hearts and souls,

being slow to speak but quick to show love. We can do it! We can embody Christ in our actions, it just takes a bit of work. But this is how we walk alongside each other and practise letting God heal our hearts into light. With the help of God we will.

Amen.