

Faith in action

Over the next few weeks, we'll be turning to the letter of James. I think it's particularly fitting because on the last Sunday in September, we'll be baptising our own James: James Ting.

James' letter was written to help Christians learn how to live as Christians. It's very practical.

The letter begins with "[from] James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations". Traditionally, the James who wrote this letter is held to be James, the brother of Jesus, who was the leader of the early church in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17, 15:13, Galatians 2:9).

And the people who he wrote to, the first hearers of this letter, are the Jewish believers of the time – people who have come to faith in Jesus from a Jewish background.

At the time, many of the early Christians were struggling to live out their faith in difficult circumstances – they were living amongst Jewish people who didn't follow Jesus, and held to all the Jewish laws and traditions, and also amongst gentiles – people to whom God was unknown.

It is, as I say, a very practical letter. And it's not always popular. In fact, Martin Luther, didn't like this letter at all – he didn't think it should be included in our scriptures. He didn't like it because he could not find the good news of Jesus – the gospel – within James' letter. Nowhere does it tell us that Jesus died for our sins. Nowhere does it tell us that God so loved the world that he gave his only son. Nowhere does it tell us that we are saved by God's grace through faith.

But that's okay, because James wrote his letter to people who knew those things. He wrote to them to help them respond to knowing those things. All scripture, says Paul in his second letter to Timothy, is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

It's that last part of what Paul wrote that is particularly relevant to the letter of James – “and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work”.

People will sometimes say “it doesn't matter what we believe, as long as we do the right thing.” But it does matter, because, as followers of Jesus, we do the right thing in response to what God has done for us in Jesus.

So, the letter of James encourages us to not just know about God, not just have faith in Jesus, but to respond to that knowledge and faith by what we do and how we live our lives.

Our reading today began at verse 17 of chapter one – and James starts by reminding us that every good and perfect gift is from above, from “The Father of the heavenly lights,” as James refers to God.

When we experience light in our lives and in our world, it comes from God. Think about the opening of John's gospel “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. [...] In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. [...] The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. [...] The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:1,4-5,9,14)

Jesus, in his birth in Bethlehem, was the most good and most perfect gift. And he is today, the most good and most perfect gift.

Whatever gifts we have in our lives, come from God, not from us. Every good and perfect gift comes from above... not from within us. Nothing good can come from us without being received first from God.

That's what the Pharisees got wrong in today's gospel reading. They thought that they could do something to earn their salvation. And so they heaped on regulation after regulation, trying to keep make themselves acceptable to God. Good enough. But it can't be done. Not by the Pharisees, not by anyone, not by us. Salvation can only come from above. We've got to be clear about that, or what passes for our 'faith' becomes a burden to us. And that is not what Jesus wants from his followers – not what Jesus wants from us. He said "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." (Matt 11:28-29)

James tells us that "[God] chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created." (1:18) The word of truth is God's good and perfect gift to us, but it has a purpose – that we might be a kind of first fruits of God's creation.

In Jewish tradition, the first fruits were the offering brought to the temple at the beginning of harvest. The offering was an acknowledgement that the harvest itself was a gift from God. They were given to God in thanksgiving for a good crop.

God's word has the power to change us, when we welcome it with humility. That is, when we allow ourselves to be guided and shaped by it. It becomes the implanted word that takes root in our souls, and grows to change us, so that we can bear the fruit of God's goodness in our lives and in our world.

That's what we are called to do. The challenge, of course, is to do that, to allow ourselves to be changed so we can do that.

James, in today's reading, moves on to give us some good advice about how we should all be living our lives: "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry". Good advice indeed! Wouldn't it be great if all people were quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. We all know it would be a good thing to all be like that... but somehow we fail.

James tells us why it would be a good thing "because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires." What does our anger do for us? What has human anger done for anyone?

James then tells us how to get there, "get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you." I think in modern times, we latch on to the 'moral filth' part of that verse, with definitions that are a lot narrower than James intended. We tend to think of moral filth as being sexual imagery, and foul language, and gossip, and violent video games and alcohol and vapes and so on. Things which are common in our society, things which are easy to judge others for, and things which are easy to keep private if we indulge in them ourselves.

But James speaks about "get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent." What James is talking about is far broader than the narrow list that we often leap to. Yes, it's lust and loss of

self control, but it's also greed and envy and the pursuit of power and all the rest. The 'things of this world' that people seek, rather than seeking God in their lives.

As well as that direction, James also encourages us to "humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you."

We need to all accept God's word in our lives... but we need to do more than just hear it.

"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 what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like." (James 1:22-24)

It's not enough to know the scriptures. I think about all the children in the 1970s who went to Sunday School each week, and learned memory verse on memory verse. They learned lots of the bible. And where are they now?

It's not enough to know the scriptures, we need to respond to them. If the word of God is truly planted within us, it's going to show in our lives. If you think about the Christian leaders and examples you have known, well, they might have had impressive biblical knowledge, but even more, I'm sure their lives showed the fruit of the spirit: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

James tells us in verse 26 that "Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless."

If you come to church on Sunday, and if you participate in the life of the church, that's great, but if you spend the rest of your week, gossiping and badmouthing others and blaming others, and putting others down, then that's wrong.

So, if you say you follow Jesus on Sunday, the way you live your life on Monday through Saturday needs to be a match. If you want to develop a faith that really works, you have to work on your faith. You have to live it out.

This is how we will know that what has been planted in us is bearing good fruit: the most vulnerable people in our community will be cared for by us, and our lives will become more Christ-like, as we live our faith with integrity and purpose. As we do that, our faith won't be just words: it will be faith in action.

As James says, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." (James 1:27)

In the Jerusalem that James knew, orphans and widows were the most vulnerable people in society. They were completely dependent on the generosity of others. Our society today is far more advanced, and has social security systems that may not be perfect, but make a big difference. Nevertheless, there are, and will always be, people who fall through the gaps. People who don't quite fit into the right category for help, or won't accept help and so on.

It is good that we here at St Ives Uniting support the Exodus foundation with our weekly donations, and it does make a difference. It is a practical way we can take care of the 21st century equivalents of the 'widows and orphans'.

But taking care of widows and orphans, of the homeless, means more than giving donations of food. It means praying for them. Advocating for them. Thinking about them when you vote.

James described those who hear without doing as people who look at themselves in a mirror. The direction of our gaze matters. If we are always looking at ourselves, focused on our own needs and desires, James says that we are deceiving ourselves.

Acting on our faith means looking outside ourselves, into the “perfect law” of Christ, and persevering as we work on our faith, so we can, as individuals and as a church, truly have a faith in action.

Amen