

A few years ago, I went shopping at Kmart with a young female relative. We made our purchases and headed toward the exit... the relative said to me “Get your receipt ready, because they’ll want to check it.” I said “No they won’t” and just walked straight out with my new large Lego set tucked under my arm. When the relative caught up with me, having been asked to produce her receipt by the woman at the exit, she was amazed that I hadn’t been stopped to ask for my receipt.

Conservatively dressed middle aged white men don’t shoplift, as a rule. I’m used to not being stopped.

When I mentioned this to my sister, she suggested that I should take up shoplifting – not for personal gain, of course, but just to teach them a lesson.

It’s interesting to think about how different people are routinely treated differently, and what the basis for that different treatment is. I’m presuming Kmart has lots of data on shoplifting, for instance, and has identified tell tale signs of shoplifting (and I’m sure that openly carrying a very large box of Lego under one arm isn’t one of them), and they stop people on the basis of whether they exhibit those tell-tale signs or not. Seems reasonable, right?

But what if one of the signs of a likely shoplifter turns out to be the person’s age – is that reasonable?

Or what if it’s the colour of their skin? Or the quality of their clothes? Or the amount of visible tattooing they have? Reasonable? Or not?

And do we, as individuals, or even as a church, have similar attitudes to people based on their age or background or appearance? Who do we choose to trust? Who do we choose to welcome? Who will we accept as friends?

Those questions should be in our minds as we turn to the second chapter of the letter of James, this morning’s New Testament reading.

And James begins by clearly stating what we should be doing:

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favouritism. (2:1).

Easy. Except, then he adds, “Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in.”

By ‘meeting’, James means a worship gathering, so it’s like two people coming into church on a Sunday morning, one rich and well-presented, one poor and dressed in rags. We know we should treat them equally, but I wonder if we would. And I wonder if I would?

When I was at lay preacher school, one of my fellow students, Diana, told me about setting out to illustrate this principle in a service, by having her husband enter a church dressed as a homeless man during the sermon. It didn’t work though... or maybe it did, because her husband was turned away at the door. Now, Diana’s husband was a method actor: He’d not washed since Friday morning, and spent all the time since he’d got home from work on Friday wearing his finest op-shop clothes. And gone jogging. And poured wine over himself and rolled around in the dirt.

It's all very well to say we'd welcome a poor person dressed filthy old clothes, but it's not going to be something that happens very often here in St Ives. But we should think about which people we might reject or even just treat differently based on their appearance.

Of course, it's not just about those we might treat unfairly badly... but also about those we might treat unfairly well.

Think about who would we like to welcome to our church? Would we like some more young families to join us? Would we like some more young adults? Would we like some more people who are musicians or florists? Of course!

But what if people don't fit into those groups? What about the others? What about the people who are already here who we might overlook in our excitement to welcome newcomers.

What about the poor in spirit that Jesus spoke about in the sermon on the mount? What about those whose age or health or circumstance means they can't contribute as much as others can to the life of the church. What about the person who's too quiet? Or the person who's too loud?

James insists that we welcome the poor - he challenges his readers - whether in the first century AD, or the twenty-first: "If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?"

But there's more to what he says than simply "Don't be mean to the poor."

Because he tells us: "Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?" (2:5)

We are rich people here. While there are many people who are richer than us, and while all our circumstances will be different, in terms of the world, and in terms of history. We live in some of the wealthiest suburbs in the wealthiest city in one of the wealthiest countries in the world.

And with our wealth comes a responsibility - and also some guilt. He tells us showing partiality to the rich is not only wrong - but it's also foolish.

"But you have dishonoured the poor?" asks James "Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court?"

What was true in the time of James remains true today. If people are being exploited in society or in the world, who are they being exploited by? It's not the poor. Who is dragging you to court to solve a dispute? Again, it's not the poor.

Another challenge in verse 7: Are [the rich] not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?

We often favour the wealthy, because we want to be like them, or we want them to share their wealth with us in some way. And yet, it's seldom in the nature of the rich to share. The gap between rich and poor is increasing in Australia, as it is in most places in the world.

It seems to be human nature, though, to be prejudiced, to discriminate against, to show partiality.

As Paul wrote to the Galatians (Galatians 3:28) There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

And while our society has done fairly well as a multicultural society, there is still a long way to go – and of course there is the ever growing division between rich and poor.

What James writes here about the split between rich and poor and the danger of wealth is not new – We heard it in our Old Testament reading from the book of Proverbs – “Rich and poor have this in common: The Lord is the Maker of them all”. (Proverbs 22:2), “Do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not crush the needy in court” (Proverbs 22:22)

We hear it too in the Old Testament prophets – Amos, for instance, has the warning “Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land” (Amos 8:4), and into the New Testament with John the Baptist saying “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.”

In the sermon on the mount, Jesus said “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, [...] But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, [...] For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21) and later “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” (Matthew 19:24)

And this all comes back, as James says, to the commandment “Love your neighbour as yourself,” (Leviticus 19:18). When Jesus was asked what the most important commandment was, that was part of his answer – Matthew chapter 22, (verses 37-40) “Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.””

While the danger is most often that we put ourselves first, there is also the danger of the opposite. I’ve shared before that loving our neighbours as ourselves doesn’t mean thinking less of ourselves, rather it means thinking of ourselves less.

Often, we fail to show compassion toward ourselves. If we don’t love ourselves very much, then loving our neighbours as ourselves isn’t going to mean much. If we seek to see others as God sees them, without prejudice, we need to see ourselves the same way.

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, says James, “Love your neighbour as yourself,” you are doing right. But if you show favouritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. (James 2:8-10)

God wants us to follow his ways always. Not some of his ways some of the time.

For he who said, “You shall not commit adultery,” also said, “You shall not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker. (James 2:11).

It doesn’t matter what we do wrong, or how many things we do wrong. It is wrong. It doesn’t matter how many laws we keep, if we break a single law, then we are lawbreakers.

James tells us we should remember that: “Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.”

Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us, as we pray.

We spend a lot of time in church, thinking about what God has done for us through Jesus. Jesus who came into the world to live our life, to die for us on the cross, and open the way to reconciliation with God to all who turn to him in faith.

And we say that what matters is that we have faith in him. That’s right, isn’t it: Sola Fide – “by faith alone” is one of the principles of the reformation.

But as true as that is, James gives us a challenge – he asks in verse 14, “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?”

What do you think?

He goes on: “Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?” (James 2:15-16)

When disaster strikes others, do we send assure them that “Our thoughts and prayers go out to them”, or do we do something more? Do we pray for people who might be hungry in our city, or do we give food to Exodus? Do we tell our neighbour who is upset that we are praying for them, or do we listen to them and hug them?

We’re not going to solve all the problems of the world, but we can solve some of them, and we can, at least, remove some of the pain and suffering, some of the time. And if we truly love our neighbours as ourselves, that’s what we will do.

Yes, “Sola Fide”, we are saved by faith alone, but when we have that faith, it will have an effect on us. As individuals and as a church.

James says, in the last verse of our reading today “... faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”

I guess you could equally say faith without a response to that faith, is not real faith.

Or, I guess, if we say we turn to Jesus, but don’t let Jesus into our lives, we haven’t really turned to him.

If we are working out our faith in our lives, then we won’t be judging people by their appearance, we won’t be preferential in our dealings with others, we won’t be favouring the rich over the poor, and we certainly won’t be taking advantage of the poor. We will be welcoming people of all backgrounds and appearances into our church and into our lives, and we will be caring for those in need.

So... how are you going today? Is your faith merely a statement of what you believe or perhaps a box to tick on a census form? Or is your faith, changing your life and changing the world? Is the faith you profess dead, or is it alive?

Amen.