

## **Sermon:** People like us?

We are living in a strange situation. We are now entering our third month of lockdown, and while there is the general thought that it will come to an end in two or three months, we don't know when it will or how long the 'ending lockdown' process will take. We hope and pray that we will be able to meet here for Christmas, but wonder if we'll still have to wear masks, or be allowed to sing. We're missing Father's Day together today. We've missed birthdays and anniversaries. We've been unable to attend funerals. We can't do simple things like meet friends for coffee or go to the shops. It's a pretty bad time all round.

But on the other hand, we are pretty fortunate people. Even in the second year of Covid, in terms of our standard of living, our life expectancy, and our safety and security, our healthcare, have never been as good. And although we will have problems, and we shouldn't ignore them or gloss over them, we generally are fortunate people.

We do live in one of the wealthiest countries in the world. We live in one of the wealthiest cities in that country. And we live in some of the wealthiest suburbs in that city. In some of the nicest homes.

As I said, a strange situation.

We are – mostly – quite secure, and quite comfortable. Just about everyone I've spoken to has been double vaccinated for Covid, and those that haven't – like me – are just waiting for our second shot. We might be isolated, but we like where we are, mostly: we like the way things are done, in our lives, in our work, in our families, and even in our church.

And there's a danger in that. And the danger is that our comfortable ways become what is most important in our lives, they become exclusive.

You may have heard the story of vicar who arrives in his new parish in rural England. For a few days, he doesn't shave, he doesn't wash. And on the first day he's due to take a service at his new church, he puts on his oldest clothes, splashes a bit of left over wine down the front of his old coat, puts an moth-eaten scarf on, and heads to church.

The people at church see this apparently homeless man – a vagrant – arriving. (This was, of course, before Covid). They don't know what to do – they don't know what to say so no one talks to him. But he goes into the church. He sits down near the front. No one sits near him (not that anyone would normally sit near the front, anyway!) The congregation is excited to meet their new minister,

and wonder where he, but 10 o'clock comes and goes and the service is due to start so at about ten past the organist starts playing the first hymn. And at the end of the hymn, much to the shock of the congregation, the homeless man steps up to the lectern, removes his dirty scarf revealing his clerical collar, pulls a razor out of his pocket starts shaving his stubble, and introduces himself to the parish as their new vicar.

The congregation realise what has happened, and in a flash of realisation see their own prejudices.

It's a nice story, but its origins are obscure. And it seems a bit unlikely – it probably never happened. But it does reveal a truth – we tend not to cope with people who are different to us.

We might not think about it, but we all have our preferences of who we like to be with – and who we wouldn't. Some prefer to be around educated folks and look down at those who are not academic enough. Some of us would rather spend time with people with particular political views. Most of us want to be around people just like we are, or just like we want to be. And we like particular ways of doing church, our worship style, our music, our theological views, and of course our short sermons.

While we might know that we should be accepting of all people... we find that most people we know are like us... we might not even realise that we're looking down on others.

This is not a new problem, however, it is as old as Christianity. As we've heard today, James when he was writing to the early church, addressed it clearly.

First, there is a principle that we need to follow (2:1) "My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favouritism".

In saying "my brothers and sisters," James reminds us that the problem is a family problem – it's a problem for all of us. And rather than telling us the problem is discriminating against people we don't like, he tells us that the problem is favouring people we do like.

The issue is "favouritism". In the book of Acts, Peter says "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism" (Acts 10:34) – and so it follows that if God does not favour some over others, then neither should we. There is no difference between people, in God's eyes.

The apostle Paul writes "This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for

all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” (Romans 3:22-24)

There are many ways in which favouritism shows up in our society and even in our church today, and often we don't even realise it.

We can favour people based on their gifts and abilities. We can show favouritism on the basis of personality, or looks or economic standing or politics.

I haven't found any statistics to back this up, but I think that the most common criticism that others have of Christians is that they are hypocrites – that they say one thing and they do another. As I reflected last week it's by our love that Jesus said we would be known, but, generally, it's not by our love that we are known in our society today.

And that's what James is telling us here: don't claim to be a Christian, and then think you're better than others.

Then James talks specifically about the issue of wealth: “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. 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,” (2:2-3)

It's not just wealth: by his jewellery and “his fine clothes” it is evident that he is dressed to impress – to be seen and noticed.

The second person is identified as a “poor person in dirty clothes.” “Dirty” might not be the filthy clothes of homeless person – it might be work clothes after a day or night's labour.

There is nothing wrong with extending a warm welcome to the rich visitor. The problem is in treating the poor visitor differently. There is a distinction in the way that the two visitors are received.

Although the characters in this story exist only as an illustration, scenes like this no doubt took place every day and James' time. Of course, in Covid times, this doesn't apply in a practical sense – because we have no idea who's coming to church on YouTube, but I think in non-Covid times, it does: sometimes in church, but even more often in workplaces and in social situations.

So in verse 4, James challenges his readers, and us: “have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?”

The answer is yes. Even if we don't mean to do it... we sometimes end up doing it.

We've all seen the story in recent weeks of the Christ Embassy Sydney Church in Blacktown which held a church service in breach of public health orders. Sixty adults and children. Thirty adults fined \$1000 each and the church fined \$5000.

I absolutely think that they should not have met. And they should have been fined. Whether they should have been pilloried in the media as they were, is a different question. And the most common comment I've seen on social media wasn't "I hope they've learned their lesson" or "I hope that discourages others" it was "Where is he from?" Their pastor is a person of colour – "Where is he from?" with the implied "He's not one of us".

Over the last ten years, I've had the privilege of visiting and leading services at many churches, and I generally stayed after the service for morning tea and a chat. And people often took the opportunity to talk about some of the big issues for them – issues of theology and politics and church governance – and of course 'why isn't presbytery doing more to help?'.

Sometimes the issues raised were truly 'out there'.

And often someone has come up to me after I've been talking to someone about one of those 'out there' topics, and said something like: Oh he does go on. She's a bit weird. Sorry, you got stuck talking to him. Oh, don't listen to her.

I have to admit that sadly I have done exactly the same thing. Hopefully, I'm getting better at it and don't simply dismiss people because have some ideas which I consider strange or perhaps just wrong.

But I think we all do it: someone's not like us, so we dismiss them. Someone doesn't share our views, therefore they must not understand properly. Or therefore they must be stupid.

And so, beginning in verse five, James encourages Christians to change their views firstly, because favouritism is inconsistent with God's call to us. (v. 5) "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?"

He echoes Jesus' teaching in the sermon on the mount "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven...Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." (Matthew 5:3,5)

Then James tells us that favouritism is wrong because it isn't the poor that are the problem – it's the rich. And then, not the rich themselves, but how we treat them: "But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong? ". It's the wealthy of the world who do the exploiting – whether they mean to or not. And it's the rich who do the oppression – whether they mean to or not. And, of course, it's only the rich people that can afford to sue you...

James establishes his point by asking a series of three questions; Who is oppressing you? Who is dragging you in to court? And who is blaspheming the name of him to whom you belong? The answer to all three questions is the same, it is the unbelieving rich.

The rich and the wealthy of the world offend God – blaspheme the noble name – by using their God-given wealth unfaithfully.

I'm not saying wealth is bad. And we have several biblical examples of wealthy people being faithful. And we have many, many post-biblical examples of wealthy people – Christian and otherwise – who use their wealth wisely and faithfully and for the good of others.

But wealth brings with it problems of its own. Wealthy people will be tempted in ways that poor people never are. Wealth isn't a barrier to faith, but it is, often, an obstacle.

We are going to celebrate holy communion together this morning, and God's table is open to all.

You may feel you're not worthy. You may feel that other people aren't worthy.

The truth is that none of us are worthy. We have all done the wrong thing. We have all shown favouritism. We have all, in the words of Paul, sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

But God reached out to us by sending his Son into the world, into the fallen world, to invite us into God's family: Rich and poor, young and old, no matter what our background.

Jesus lived as one of us, and he died as one of us, and in dying he took the burden of all that we've done wrong on himself. And he rose again on the third day, the firstborn of the new creation, to show us the sure and certain hope of eternal life.

So as we share this symbolic meal today, let us work to put our favouritism to the side, let us love our neighbours as ourselves, and let us remember the words of Paul from his letter to the Galatians: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

Amen.