

SERMON, 29 AUGUST 2021 – JAMES 1.17-27 & MARK 7

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



Having spent several weeks looking at Matthew 6 “I am the bread of life”, for the next few weeks the Lectionary moves to Mark’s gospel and the letter of James. As I always say, don’t just read the bits we get given, read the whole letter. If we’d started at verse 1 of chapter 1 we would read “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion. Greetings.”

There are two James who were Jesus’ disciples – James the son of Zebedee, and James the son of Alphaeus. James and John the sons of Zebedee were the third and fourth disciples, Peter, Andrew, James and John – Galilean fishermen. We know about them – I remember my Sunday School teacher, Miss Thynne, telling us about James and John the sons of Zebedee, and being told off for going boing, boing, boing, like Zebedee on the Magic Roundabout. We know nothing about James the son of Alphaeus, he just appears in the lists of the disciples, we are told nothing else.

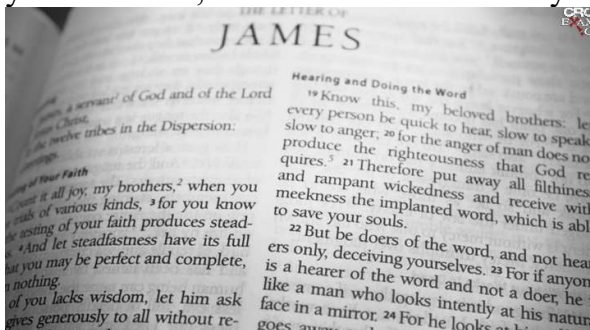


The other James in the New Testament is James the brother of Jesus. It’s always a bit difficult to get our head round Jesus having brothers and sisters because they only appear in the story on one occasion (recorded in Matthew 12) when

Jesus is not exactly polite to them – “who are my brothers and sisters?” he asks. I wonder what they made of their big brother, what they made of him while he was as normal a human being as he ever was, and what they made of him after his resurrection. We don’t have any Gospel record of him sitting down with his mum, his brothers, his sisters after his resurrection. Paul tells us that he James did see the Risen Christ, so I would like to think that Jesus sat down with his closest family and helped them understand.

Whatever Jesus said, his brother James became what St Paul, in Galatians chapter 2, called a pillar of the church. When Paul went to Jerusalem after his conversion, it was Peter, John and James to whom he spoke. Can you imagine how hard it must have been for Paul – the man who had gone to Damascus to keep Judaism pure, root out Christians – how hard it must have been for him to gain acceptance – and how hard it must have been for the church in Jerusalem to accept him. Peter, John and James must have been great men of faith to accept him, to help others accept him – and they must have been great men of faith to have guided the church through its first few years. When Peter and John moved away from Jerusalem to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ further afield, it was James, the brother of Jesus, who remained to lead that church. I use the word “church”, but we should remind ourselves it is nothing as formal, as structured as we are used to.

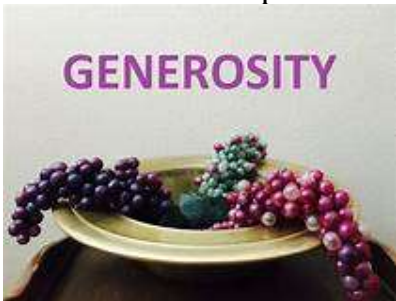
Tradition has it that James the brother of Jesus is the author of this letter. I’ll go with that – it may seem odd to describe yourself as “a servant of God and of your brother”, but Jesus was not exactly a normal brother to have.



The letter is addressed “To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” – to the Jewish church. Peter and Paul are often described as the apostles to the gentiles, James for the Jewish church. Nearly all of Jesus’ followers were Jews, most of the early believers were Jews – and they would have seen Jesus as their Messiah, they would have seen him as the fulfilment of their faith. As the church spread, as men and women who had no background in Judaism came to believe in Jesus, it was a major change in what the church was like. A racial mix, a religious mix, people believing and acting in different ways, worshipping and serving God in different ways – none of us can really imagine that, there was far more variety in Jerusalem church than there is here.

The letter of James is written to men and women for whom faith was difficult – much, much harder than it is for us. By the time this letter was written you would not be welcome in the temple, you would not be welcome in your synagogue, not welcome in what had always been your holy place – that hurts. You would have lost friends, people who couldn't believe – some of your friends would have become enemies. It's never nice when that happens. Not only had you angered your Jewish brothers and sisters, but you were starting to be seen as a threat to the Romans. You could get away with worshipping God, a God who wasn't the Roman Emperor, if you were a Jew – but if you weren't a Jew and you were worshipping a God who wasn't the Roman Emperor, that would be dangerous. It wasn't long into the life of the church before persecution, violence, death became a reality. Stephen was the first to be killed for his faith – and that was probably only a couple of years after Jesus' death. James, as in James and John, was the first disciple to be martyred for his faith – Acts 12.2 “James, the brother of John was put to death by the sword” – most of us would run a mile if that was the likely outcome of our faith.

Trials, tribulations, the sheer hard work of being a believer – and how does James tell us to cope.

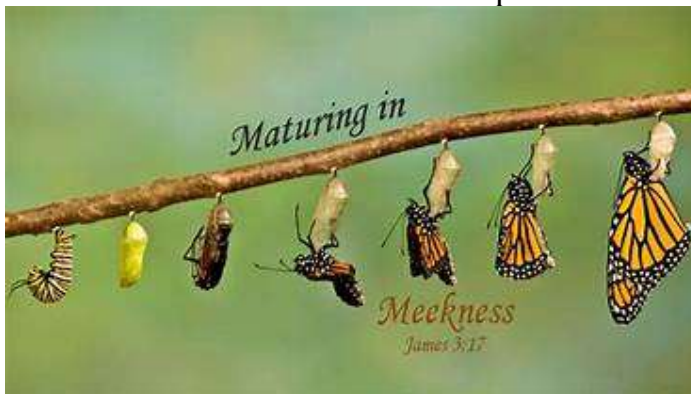


“Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above”. Of course we are lovely, generous, wonderful human beings – just ask my wife! It doesn't come easy, does it – and even if we are generous with those we love, how much harder do we find it to be generous to those who are a struggle. I walked through the centre of Derby the other day for the first time in over a year, wearing my dog collar. I had forgotten how many homeless people there are in Derby for whom a man in a dog collar is (understandably) an easy target. I was not feeling generous after that walk!

Indeed, cross, angry – angry at them, angry at the system, angry at our Society – just angry. James tells me “to be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger” – how much better would the world be if we listened to that advice, how much better a human being I would be if I listened to that advice.



“Rid yourself of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness” says James – the Authorised Version of the bible tells us to “lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness” which is my favourite biblical verse. It makes me smile, the superfluity of naughtiness sounds quite fun – but let’s be honest, humans are perfectly capable of making everything sordid, filthy, wicked. You don’t need me to give examples – we all know. We were watching an episode of “Shetland” the other week, wonderful Anne Cleaves detective series – it was dealing with people trafficking. Young, vulnerable men and women, being moved across the world, held prisoner, abused, violated – “superfluity of naughtiness”, it’s not funny. We know what humanity can do to vulnerable women, to vulnerable men, to vulnerable children – we prefer to get angry about what is happening in Afghanistan, or communities in Derby where people are of a different ethnicity to us – but we all know that we do need to look at ourselves. We all know it doesn’t take much for us to be go where we shouldn’t, to be what we shouldn’t – evil is a presence in all of us.



Evil is a presence in all of us, and God has the power to save. We can’t do it ourselves, we aren’t whole humans because we are English, we’re not whole human beings because we’re good Anglicans – we are only on the way to being whole if we “welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.” We don’t do meekness well, we are not good at emptying ourselves before God, even in church – but we must, we must stand before God as we are, ask his forgiveness, and give our lives to Him. We will stand before him, we will know his love, and the fulfilment of all he has done for us as he went to the cross, he died and rose again.

It is not enough to be a hearer, it is not enough to be religious – we are called to be carers, to care for orphans and widows in their distress. I do quite a lot of the latter – but James isn't just talking about being a nice Vicar and doing a good funeral, in James time there was the practicalities of ensuring that widows were housed, fed, cared for – that's a different matter, I can do nice Vicar, but I'm not sure I want them home with me!

Orphans – sweet, loveable, no – hard work, a huge responsibility. 2,000 years later, no one in the world wants the responsibility for the orphans of the world. If we put half the amount of energy in to caring for the widow and orphans as we do in turning our backs on them, we really would be a Christian country.

We are God's people, we are called to serve this world – it's not easy, but in God's strength we can do amazing things. Generous, perfect (well, trying for it) – God's gift. Amen.