

Readings

James Chapter 2 verses 1 – 10 (11 – 13) 14 – 17

¹My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? ²For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, ³and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please,' while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there,' or, 'Sit at my feet,' ⁴have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? ⁶But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? ⁷Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

⁸You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' ⁹But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Mark Chapter 7 verses 24 – 37

²⁴Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, ²⁵but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' ²⁸But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' ²⁹Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter.' ³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

³¹Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³²They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha,' that is, 'Be opened.' ³⁵And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷They were astounded beyond measure, saying, 'He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.'

Reflection

What do the following actors / actresses have in common?

- Albert Finney
- Peter Ustinov
- David Suchet
- Margaret Rutherford
- Julia McKenzie
- Joan Hickson

The actors on the left have all played Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot. The actresses on the right have all played Jane Marple. In our house, one of the genres of TV that we really enjoy is that of Murder Mystery. This might seem an odd starting point for a reflection on Scripture. However, it is really rather appropriate as an introduction to our reading from the Letter of James.

If you stop to think about it, all detectives have a similar challenge. They are faced – although the degree of violence may differ – with a crime scene. Their challenge is to take on board the surface details – what appears to have happened here? But looks can be deceptive. Very often, the immediate presentation of the crime may bear very little relation to the realities. The cause of death may not always be as obvious as it seems and, of course, what the crime scene may often not reveal is the motive and causes of what has gone on. Literally, the crime scene is merely the starting point of the investigation to establish the identity of the culprit. As the investigation develops, the detectives will meet any number of people and will need to assess the degree to which they are lying or hiding information crucial to the investigation.

What does this have to say to us in the light of James' letter? This chapter of the Letter begins with a blunt question: 'My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? There is an old saying that says "You only get one opportunity to make a first impression". When we meet people – and particularly for the first time – I don't you if you realised it but we mentally look them up-and-down and make a whole host of assumptions about them. We might assume their racial origin, their age, their attitudes – and that's just for starters.

The risk of this is, of course, that people may present themselves in a way that acts as a mask. Take for example, Jonny Peacock. He appeared recently on Strictly come dancing. Dressed appropriately for ballroom dancing and if that was the only image you had of him, you could easily make the assumption that he was a perfectly normal individual – and, I hasten to add, he is exactly that. But his costume hides the fact that he is an amputee and has a blade instead of his right leg.

All people are exactly the same in that they may hide all sorts of differences under the surface. As some of you know, both our daughter Abbie and myself are on the Autism Spectrum with Asperger's Syndrome. One of the ways that condition works itself out in me is that I find people really difficult to read – What are thinking? What are their intentions? What are they like? What mood are they in? What difficulties are they facing? All these questions are very difficult for me to grasp from the surface details or the way people present themselves.

Recently, the Church of England has undertaken an in-depth exploration of human relationships and sexuality called 'Living in Love and Faith'. What the research has revealed – especially if we are open-minded – is that all these areas are far more complex than most of us even beginning to think that they are and that for some the personal consequences for some are incredibly difficult, painful and frustrating. What we tend to lose sight of is the two simple facts that: -

1. We are all created by God in his image
2. He sent his son to take on human flesh and to die on the cross to pay the price of our sins regardless of our gender. The risk of forgetting these crucial facts is that we make all sorts of assumptions about people and treat them accordingly. Equally, we run the risk of looking at others – especially if they are different from us because of skin colour, disability or sexuality – and treat them harshly purely because they are not like us and we don't see person that God created and sent his Son to die on the cross for.

Let us, however, be clear. This does not mean that having particular friends is absolutely fine and OK. What we are saying, however, is that regardless of what people may look like – they may be poorly dressed, homeless, reliant on a Foodbank or whatever – they all deserve to be treated as individuals deserving of respect and love-in-Christ. We may struggle to put that into action but, as James' Letter reminds us, making the effort to treat all people with respect and Christian-love is not optional and is an outworking of Christ's love for us and his redemption of us.

I pray that we may all have the courage, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to strive to do just that.

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