

Sunday 9 September, 2018 – 10.30am Eucharist

*A sermon preached by the Rt Revd Richard Condie, Bishop of Tasmania and former member of the Chapter of St Paul's Cathedral, on the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost; the second sermon in a series on the Epistle of James:*

**Reading:** James 2 : 1-7

Let us Pray: *Lord make your word our rule, your Spirit our teacher, and your glory our supreme concern, for the sake of our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

A man sat at a metro station in Washington D.C and started to play the violin; it was a cold January morning. He played six Bach pieces for about 45 minutes. During that time, since it was rush hour, it was calculated that thousands of people went through the station, most of them on their way to work.

In the 45 minutes the musician played, only six people stopped and stayed for a while. About 20 gave him money, but continued to walk their normal pace. He collected \$32. When he finished playing and silence took over, no one noticed it. No one applauded, nor was there any recognition.

No one knew this, but the violinist was Joshua Bell, one of the best musicians in the world. He played one of the most intricate pieces of music ever written with a violin that was worth 3.5 million dollars.

Two days before his playing in the subway, Joshua Bell sold out at a theatre in Boston and the seats averaged over \$100 each.

This is a real story. Joshua Bell playing incognito in the metro station was organised by the Washington Post as part of a social experiment about perception, taste, and the priorities of people.

The article which followed asked:

Do we perceive beauty?

Do we stop to appreciate it?

Do we recognize the talent in an unexpected context?

But I think the experiment also leads to some other questions:

Why do we discriminate?

On what basis do we show favouritism?

How is it that we appreciate the extraordinary skill of a person in one context, but miss it in another?

Our text today from the Epistle of James introduces a very practical question for us.

*My brothers and sisters, do you, with your acts of favouritism really believe in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ?*

As Dean Andreas said in introducing this series from the letter of James last week;

*“It is a letter about ‘true religion’, which James describes not only as a profoundly held faith and love for God, but the practical care for others and oneself.”*

This is a practical letter. Practical Christian discipleship; what it means to LIVE the faith we profess.

And the particular issue in focus in Chapter 2 is the matter of favouritism especially favouring the rich over the poor in the Christian community, the well-to-do, OVER the down-and-out.

This is the issue of partiality, of discrimination of preferential treatment.

The word Paul uses literally means “receiving the face”. It is about judging the book by its cover, the person by their appearance.

The example he gives is very vivid (verses 2-4)

*2 For 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, 3 and 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,” 4 have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?*

Those of us who have been around church for a while will know the “you can’t sit in my seat” kind of mentality. You will probably recognise even if, not as starkly as portrayed here this kind of event in your church life.

I remember the day at a congregation I was involved in when the Prime Minister came to church.

(I can’t remember his name now – it’s hard to keep track!). Sorry – cheap shot - not true – it was Kevin Rudd! We were on our best behaviour, best welcomers in place, kindest hospitality.

That is ONLY OK if we also did that for the ordinary person who walked into church after him.

It is definitely NOT OK if we showed a level of welcome to him that we didn't show to others.

If we show partiality - verse 4 tells us; *we will be divided among ourselves and judge with evil in our hearts*

The poignant question that hangs over the chapter is found in verse 2; *Do you really believe in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ?*

They're pretty big stakes aren't they? In effect he is saying he would really doubt the genuineness of our faith if we behaved in that manner.

It would be evidence that we didn't understand the faith, the gospel, true religion and belief in the glorious Lord Jesus.

To expound why it is so important James appeals to three principles.

- God's Choice
- Lawful Living
- Lively Faith

Let's look at each in turn:

## **1. God's choice (verse 5)**

*5 Listen, 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?*

So often in the bible we find God working with the unlikely with the marginalised. It is the way he formed his people in the beginning.

*Deut. 7:7 It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. 8 It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.*

He even sends His Son to be born in poverty and obscurity to a virgin girl in a cave and laid in a manger.

*“God shows no partiality”, Paul says in Rom 2:11.*

When it comes to relating to us. God doesn't care if we have all the wealth and finery or if we don't have a cent to our name. He doesn't discriminate between the influential and powerless those who have got together and those are falling apart those who mould to the church's unspoken expectations and those who know nothing of our tradition. Whether you have your stuff together or you are in a mess, He takes us as we come.

God has chosen the poor and the despised to show that his way of relating to us is all of grace all of mercy. And the point he makes is true isn't it? The materially poor in the world are often those who are rich in faith.

I used to be the Vicar of St Jude's in Carlton. Local politicians lamenting the fractures in the community, Lygon St Traders, Students, Wealthy home owners, Academics at the Uni, Residents of the Housing Estates. Nowhere do these disparate groups come together. I can tell you one place they do and that is in the church, at St Jude's and the Church of all Nations and the Salvos because God doesn't discriminate.

And here is the theological reason why we are to honour everyone in our midst, not a single one of us have earned any right to our salvation, haven't contributed one jot. It is all of grace. All of God's gracious initiative. That is how we should treat each other.

## **2. Second Principle: Lawful Living or simply “Love your neighbour”**

Look at verse 8-9

*James 2:8 You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” 9 But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.*

You see James is remembering the teaching of the Lord Jesus when asked to summarize the law in the two great commandments

*‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’*

*AND ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’*

This is why he calls it the Royal law according to the scripture. And James employs it here as a principle for the Christian gathering. If you play favourites, if show partiality, if you welcome the rich and powerful and despise the weak and poor then you sin against this law of loving your neighbour as yourself.

You see the radical inversion of the gospel is that we are no longer afraid and alienated from people around us. We are no longer enemies but neighbours

When you love Jesus then it will flow easily to loving others.

And Jesus radically redefines neighbour not as the one who is a neighbour to you who is LIKE you but the one that you are a neighbour TO

*[36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?] 37 He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."]*

This is lawful living. James says that we can't pick and choose which commandments we want to follow. We can't say; Look, I won't kill anyone or steal from them but then not show love to the outsider.

No, he says; You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to scripture. "You shall love your neighbour as yourself". Poor and rich together, showing no partiality but the welcome of a neighbourly community.

### **3. Third principle: A Lively Faith.**

*James 2:14: What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?*

This is quite a startling question. Can Faith save you?

We have been taught over and over that this is the ONLY way we are saved.

*Eph. 2:8: For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.*

This was one of the catch cries of the reformation foundation of our Anglican faith and formularies;

Scripture alone  
Faith alone  
Grace alone  
Christ alone  
to the Glory of God alone

Faith alone was so important to stress as people had been trying to earn their way to God by good deeds. By penance and worship and acts of mercy that God might save them.

And the great discovery of the Reformation from the scriptures, alone was that faith, alone in Christ, alone on the basis of his free gift of grace, alone was the basis of our salvation.

It is his free gift and we are its recipients. So, what is James saying? To question: “can faith save you?”

“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?”

He is using this as a device to tell us the same thing he has been saying all along in this text that our faith, if it is real will issue in right behavior.

Verse 15 tells us:

*15 If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 16 and 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? 17 So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*

The point is this: we can come here to worship, sing all the hymns we like, say all the prayers we can muster, exchange the peace, feel close to God, trust God for our sins, receive his forgiveness and revel in his grace.

But if it leaves you unmoved about the poverty of the world, the state of our nation, the detention of children on Nauru, the issues of homelessness on your doorstep, and the welcome of the stranger in your midst, especially the poor and outcast. Then James says: “do you really believe in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ?”

Faith by itself, he says if it has no works, is dead.

### **Conclusion:**

My brothers and sisters. We began with a question. Do you really believe in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ?

My prayer for us as we grapple with this most practical of New Testament letters, the epistle of James, is that we will show true lively faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, that will issue in transformed lives and a transformed community.

Welcoming the stranger in our midst, shunning favoritism and partiality, but true faith in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself for us.

In the name of Christ,

**Amen**