

Epiphany 2

13th January 2019

James – pearls of wisdom

**Introduction and a warning against rich oppressors
James 1.1,26-27; 5.1-6**

As this is my last sermon till the end of April, I thought you might enjoy this joke about sermon length!

Mrs Jones was very worried one morning when the Vicar's sermon length dropped from the usual 25-30 minutes to just 10 minutes. So she asked him at the church door when she left was he alright.

“Oh no!” said Revd Pottle “I've got a new set of false teeth and I'm struggling to get used to them. But I'm sure it will get better.

Sure enough over the next few week's the vicar's sermon got longer, from 10min, to 15min to 20 min and finally back to 25min. Then the following week the vicar preached for an hour and a half!

Mrs Jones asked the vicar at the door as she left was everything alright.

“Oh no!” said Revd Pottle “I put my wife’s teeth in by accident!”



And I should point out this joke was given to me by a lady last week and approved by my missus to share with you today! And I won't be preaching for one hour and a half - well, probably not!

PRAY

The Book of James is a far more significant book than it first appears. Buried deep within the New Testament letters it appears at first sight a bit of a one-off, unusual in its style and content, and it is frequently overlooked within this section of writings by Christians.



After all Paul wrote 13 letters of huge scope to loads of churches and even John wrote 3 letters and had the Revelation from God which form a larger part of the NT than James' solitary epistle. But every book of the Bible is important and I hope we'll gain a greater sense of the importance of the Book of James as we consider who James actually was.

Look at v1:

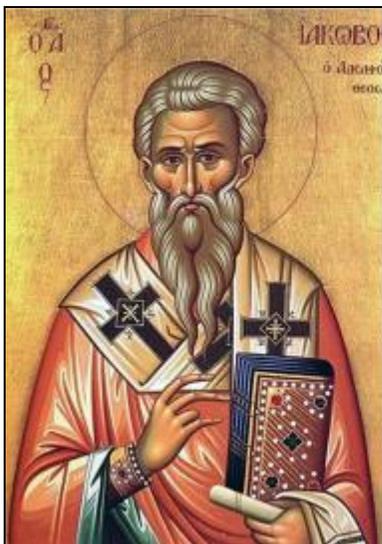
James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But that only tells half the story, because this James isn't James the well-known disciple, he wasn't the

James of Peter, James and John. No, this James was the natural born son of Joseph and Mary, yes you heard that right. Whilst Jesus was God's son born of Mary, James was actually Joseph and Mary's child. The Eastern Orthodox Church actually calls James "adelpho theo" - the brother of God - but while James was certainly brought up in the same household as Jesus, he definitely wasn't His brother. Let's instead then call him Jesus' sibling.

Now James was not one of Jesus' apostles and initially James wasn't even one of Jesus' disciples. In fact we know from Mark 3.21 that James and his family were so worried about Jesus they tried to stop his ministry by seeking to take him by force and bring him home. James and the rest of the family knew Jesus was special, but they hadn't grasped yet what he was called to when Jesus began his public ministry. But something remarkable happened to James, and this

sibling who was not an apostle, not a disciple and who once tried to stop Jesus ministry, had his life turned around. Remarkably what happened is recorded in scripture. In 1Corinthians 15.7 we read the resurrected Jesus actually appeared to James after his resurrection, and this encounter transformed him. James becomes a believer in the Lord and a disciple, and we read in the Book of Acts how he quickly became a leader in the early church and eventually the head of the Jerusalem Church.



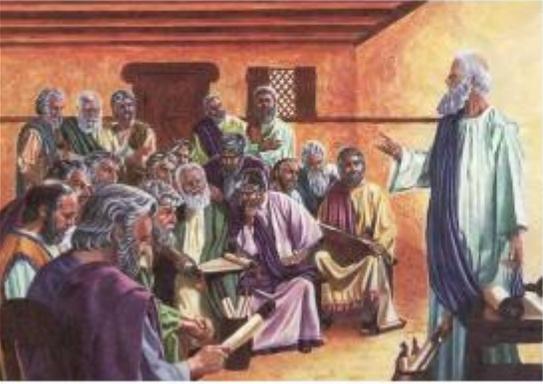
Who was the author James?

- Natural son of Joseph and Mary
Jesus' sibling
- Not an apostle and not to begin with a disciple either...
(Mk 3.21 tried to stop Jesus ministering and bring him home)
- Met resurrected Jesus (1Cor 15.7) and became a believer & follower
- Rose to become Head of Jerusalem church

When Paul in Galatians chapter 2 relates the story of the Jerusalem council meeting about whether Gentiles

should become circumcised, Paul describes meeting “the pillars of the church”, and he lists these “pillars” as Peter (the head of the whole church), John and James. In Acts 15 which describes that Jerusalem council meeting, it is James in vv13-21 who orders a letter giving instructions is sent to all the gentile churches. James was the head of the Church in Jerusalem.

James was a key figure at the Council of Jerusalem which discussed Gentile Converts



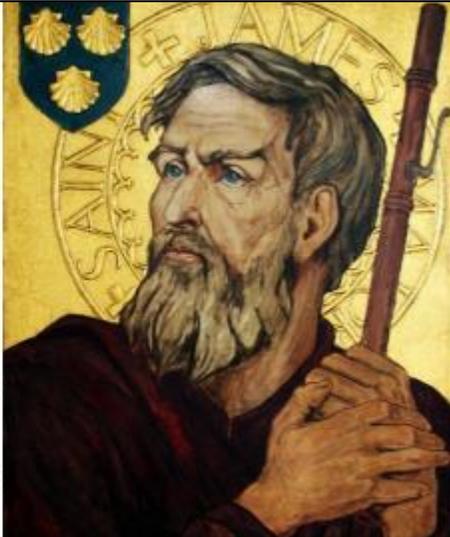
- Paul met “pillars” of the church: Peter (head of Church), John, and **James** (Gal 2.9)
- In Acts 15.13-21 **James** orders a letter be sent with instructions for all Gentile Churches.

What a remarkable epiphany he must have had when he met the resurrected Christ to turn his life around, and therefore what James has to say about Christian living makes his small Book rather important.

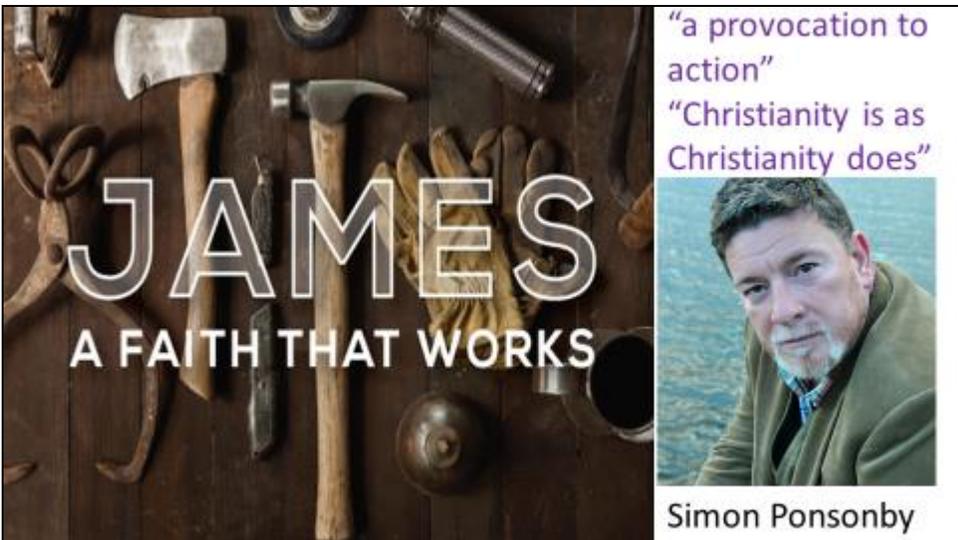
But there's more. James was nicknamed "the just" or "James the righteous" in the early church because he lived a truly holy life. He was a determined disciple who practiced what he preached. The 1st century Jewish historian Josephus said of James that he was "respected by all the Pharisees because of his self-evident, holy, righteous, godly and set apart life" - wow - even the Pharisees respected this Christian leader. James was also recorded as a fervent intercessor for the people of Israel; it was written that he knelt so often in prayer that his knees were callused and looked like camel's knees. That's what I call a man of prayer. In AD62 though James was taken by a Jewish group to the summit of the Temple, accused of undermining the Law. When James refused to renounce Jesus as his saviour, they threw him off the Temple. And as he lay dying on the floor he is recorded as saying "Father forgive them."

James “the just”

- Led a truly holy life:
“respected by all the Pharisees because of his self-evident, holy, righteous, godly and set-apart life” (Josephus 1st C)
- Fervent intercessor for Israel
- Martyred and as he lay dying said “Father forgive them...”



When we understand that it was this holy man who led the Jerusalem church who wrote the Book of James, then I hope we realise just what an important Book this is. But why did James write it?



“a provocation to action”
“Christianity is as Christianity does”

JAMES
A FAITH THAT WORKS

Simon Ponsonby

Well Simon Ponsonby the pastor and theologian says it is a “provocation to action” - a practical letter which

makes it plain to us that “Christianity is as Christianity does” - in other words, our faith is reflected in what we do. A bit like the Nike slogan, James implores his readers to “Just do it!” Over and over again James tells us in his letter “do it” - ch 1 v22, v23, v25; ch4 v17. Discipleship involves doing something - just do it. Faith in Christ leads to activity not passivity. We receive life from Christ, so we may be his hands, feet and voice in the world. And in the Book of James this is abundantly clear.



In James there are 54 imperatives in 108 verses, more “do its” in this whole letter per verse than in any other

book of the Bible. And therefore there is always the danger of reading it and feeling inadequate and guilty because we don't live up to the picture painted. But that isn't the point of this Book. I don't want you to feel guilty this term as we study James, but inspired, encouraged and provoked to action as James presents us with a wonderful picture of Jesus for us to live up to. I hope our studies will help us become God's agents of change in this world.

It's probably worth acknowledging also today, that many people have mistaken the Book of James as somehow encouraging salvation through works, that is we are made right with God by what we do. But that couldn't be further from the truth. Paul in Ephesians 2.8 wrote we were saved by grace through faith alone not works, but then in verse 10 he wrote we were created in Christ Jesus to do good works - in other

words we are saved for good works. And James tells us what these good works should look like.

54 imperatives (“do its”) in 108 verses!

It is not a book to induce guilt but to inspire Christ-likeness.

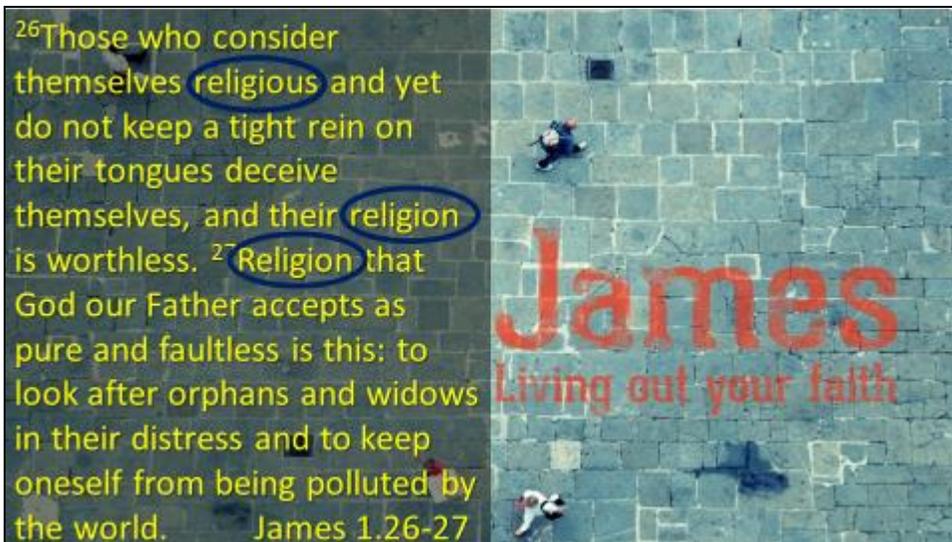


And not encouraging salvation through works...
the Book of James compliments Paul’s writing...
Eph 2.8-10 “by grace you have been saved through faith...not
by works. ...we are created in Christ Jesus to do good works
which God prepared in advance for us to do”

Simon Ponsonby believes that what lies at the heart of James’ message is a statement of what true religion looks like, and verses 26-27 of chapter 1 that we heard earlier summarise this beautifully:

²⁶Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. ²⁷Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

The word “religion” is only used 5x in the whole NT, and 3 occurrences are here in just 2 sentences. In Hebrew idiom if you repeat something three times you are saying something definitively and absolutely, so this 3-fold reference to pure, true, untainted religion which the Father accepts is hugely significant. James is stating his central point.



I suspect the word “religion” for some of us is a negative word associated with outward practices but no real faith. But the word James uses is referring to how our relationship with the Lord is expressed outwardly in terms of discipleship - how our devotion

to Christ should look in practice. James is saying this is what true religion, true faith looks like, and he gives 3 areas for focus which underpins everything we will study this term.

True religion or faith involves:

- using our words well
- caring for the poor - the widows and orphans here
- remaining untainted by the world around us.



These are the characteristics which should define us as Christians and define St. Mark’s and any church. At the

start of a New Year when people make all sorts of meaningless resolutions, I wonder if we can make these three practices central to our faith. How can we better guard our word and use them more to bless and encourage than tear down? How can we as individuals support the poor in our community and world? At St. Mark's we have a hardship fund for those in need, we support the work of the Horsham foodbank, have the free Holbrook Heart café, and offer prayer and pastoral support to all who want it. But I have no doubt there is more we could do as church and individuals. And perhaps as individuals we can reassess the charities we support. Finally, how do we remain clear from being polluted in the world. What are our priorities - do we live to honour God first or something else? James says these three priorities reveal a true faith springing from our life with Christ. I wonder what God might be inspiring us to do in 2019?

Everything in the Book of James links to one or other of these three points, and over the course of the next 7 weeks we'll explore this in much more depth. But for now to close, let's begin with Chapter 5 verses 1-6 which we heard a short while ago.



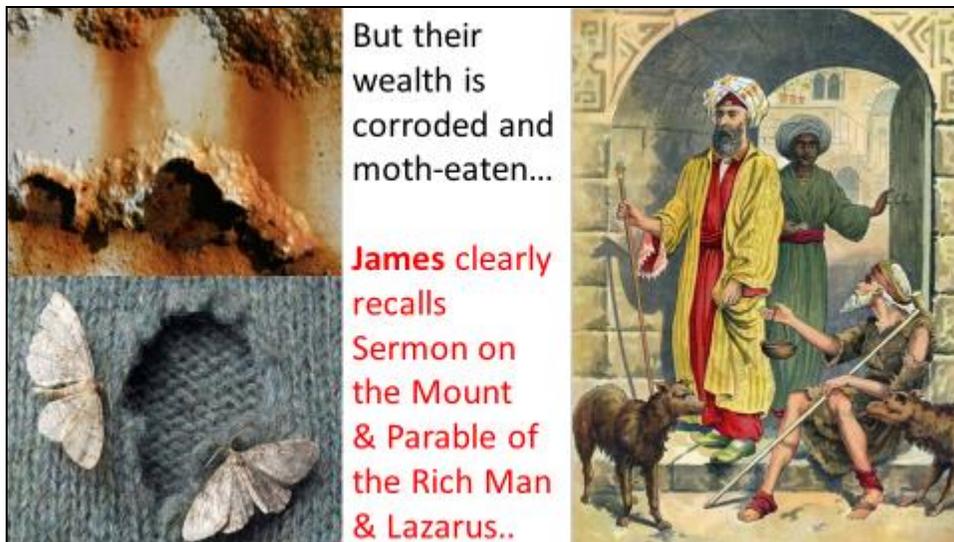
This is a strange passage perhaps for us to begin with, because I sincerely hope none of us are rich people who oppress the poor. But it can speak powerfully to us if we open ourselves to God. James was writing for sure about the rich elite in Jerusalem, perhaps the Sadducees and chief priests who lived in fine houses and grew fat on the pilgrimages and sacrifices brought

by the faithful Jews to the Temple. And no doubt his sights were also on the wealthy merchants and landowners when James speaks of the harvesters in v4 who were denied wages.

<p>Sadducees</p>  <p>Wealthy merchants</p>	<p>The rich elite in Jerusalem</p> <p>Self-indulgent; gold; silver; clothes; food; wine (v5)... at expense of the poor (v4)... BUT...</p>	<p>Chief Priests</p>  <p>Wealthy landowners</p>
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James calls them all self-indulgent (v5) - they might have fine houses full of gold, silver and lovely clothes, larders full of food and cellars full of wine - but with a prophetic voice James sees their lives and lifestyle as God sees them - full of rust and moth (v2). Here James is recalling Jesus' famous warning about storing up treasures on earth rather than in heaven from the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 6.19-20). And James knowing

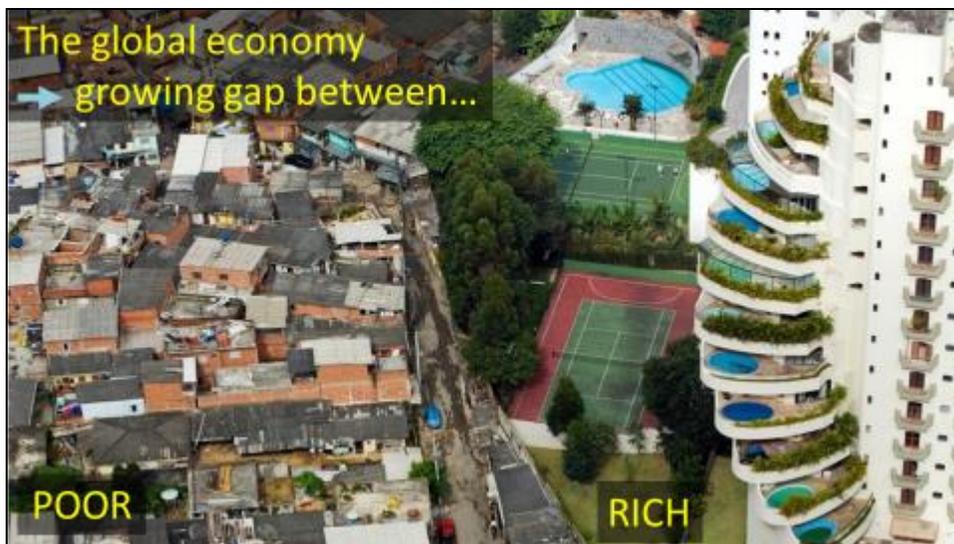
Parables like that of the Rich Man and Lazarus where the roles of the wealthy man and Lazarus the beggar are reversed after death, prophetically points out that disaster is coming the way of the rich who oppress the poor on the day of judgement.



Let's be clear, James is not condemning wealth, but greed at others expense and ignoring the plight of others. So how can we respond to this passage?

Well the global economy is set up to produce more or less the same effect as the ancient Judean economy, with money flowing steadily in one direction, so big business grows fat and the workers in factories and

small companies often in developing countries are often paid a pittance. Small groups of people grow rich whilst exploiting those lower down the production line, and often those in control poor scorn on the poor; they're lazy - "I've worked my way up, so can they".



Except poverty is often a trap from which people can't escape. Keeping James 5.1-6 at the fore-front of our mind therefore means the church should speak out against companies like Disney and Mattel who produce most of their toys in China, where alleged illegal overtime and lack of holiday and sickness pay

combined with pitiful wages, keep workers on the breadline. Should we choose to boycott such firms?



After all public outcry has changed the practices of companies like Primark and Apple who had were alleged to have quite scandalous records in relation to child labour and poor working conditions in developing countries till recently. Clothing manufacturers and cocoa/coffee producers have been amongst the worst at exploiting the poor. Can we perhaps choose to buy ethically traded or Fairtraded goods?



And finally how about petitioning government where injustice is ignored. The roll out of Universal Credit has begun in our area and I am seeing more and more requests for food vouchers. The UK has the 5th largest economy by GDP in the world, yet we have a growing problem of poverty and homelessness, “just managing families” now finding they can’t get by. This is a scandal, and James would encourage us to speak out against this. The Book of James calls us to cry out against this financial injustice and look after the poor. This week I learnt from our Children Society rep that 14% of all children in our Horsham constituency that is 3430 children, live in poverty - that is outrageous. And

as a Church we will be meeting this Year with Jeremy Quin to raise our concerns with him. I encourage you to join us petitioning him.



Growing poverty & homelessness levels in the UK are scandalous...

Can we petition our government to look after the poorest better?



To close today I want to come back to the 3-fold focus of James the righteous, who prayed fervently for the people of his time, the leader who paints a compelling picture of what a life in Christ should look like to others. Do we want as individuals and church to be people who bless with our mouths, speak up for and defend the poor, and keep ourselves free from the practices around us which pollute our faith? It isn't an easy choice to live differently, and it may prove quite

costly. But as we pray the prayer Jesus taught us and speak those words “Your Kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”, the Lord’s Kingdom will indeed be brought here on earth as we follow His lead and live the life He wants for us.

James the righteous’
3-fold focus for our
Christian lives:

1. Using our words well.
2. Caring for the poor.
3. Remaining untainted by the world around us.

Jesus’ Kingdom comes to earth through us...



YOUR KINGDOM COME
YOUR WILL BE DONE
on earth as it is in **HEAVEN**
MATTHEW 6:10

PRAY