



Sunday 8 May 2016  
The First Sunday after Ascension Day  
Choral Evensong  
Deuteronomy 15 vv. 7–11  
James 1 v. 19– 2 v. 7

## James: Christian wisdom and Doing the Word

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*'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?'*

*May I speak in the name of the living God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*

The pitch of life is not flat, all things are 'not equal', rather inequality and unfairness are part of the warp and weft of our social world. Take the recent failure of BHS, which placed 11,000 jobs at risk, and was sold for a pound by Sir Philip Green who had taken £580m out of the business. Of this, a writer in the *Financial Times*, hardly a hotbed of anti-capitalist sentiment, commenting on the clever accounting that allows individuals, to load a company with debt, take out the money and hope for the best later, made the following tongue-in-cheek observation:

*'BHS has been in a vegetative state for 20 years: leveraging up the near-corpse allowed the Greens (Sir Philip and his wife, Tina) to pump money into other job-creating things, such as the crafting of a solid-gold Monopoly set, featuring Tina's high-street acquisitions.'*

Like light to a moth, wealth draws attention, admiration and praise often with approving moral overtones, or in the case of Sir Philip a whole host of celebrity guests for his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday party with its modest price-tag of £6 million. But for those not 'feeling the love' that such invitations and inclusions bring, and needing to vent their feelings of rejection; needing to feed off what John Updike described as 'the delicious immensity of the excluded', and affirm their own sense of superiority over someone, there is always Facebook. And the possibility of sending an online 'Facebook gift' to a friend; joining, perhaps, more than 800,000 people who have sent one from a range of 'Council estate gifts' including the image of a group of young people in sportswear titled 'mob of chav scum'.

Jesus was of course entirely correct when he said 'the poor will be always be with you'. The same could be said of the stigmatization and shaming of the poor and other forms of what are often called 'symbolic violence' against those at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Unfair, patronising and mean representations of those at the margins of our own society depicting a valueless or even repulsive way of life can be found in the first century, in the nineteenth, - Charles Booth labelled those at the bottom the 'vicious and semi-criminal' class – such representations are still very much with us. Similarly, irrespective of actual behaviour, the valourization of the different groups through history who have made up the wealthy is a constant theme.

The question of what it means to be rich and what it means to be poor and, more crucially, how individual souls in each of those categories should be viewed and treated - is a subject close to the heart of the writer of tonight's favourite book. So, some quick 'passnotes' on the Epistle of James:



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Tucked towards the back of the New Testament behind the glossier and better-thumbed titles – like the Gospel of John, Paul’s epistle to the Romans, the book of Acts, James was famously denounced by Martin Luther as an ‘epistle of straw’, primarily because his emphasis on works was seen to be in conflict with the Reformation theologian’s emphasis on justification by faith and of course its champion, the Apostle Paul. Indeed, this slander has continued and more recently James has been described as part of the ‘junk mail of the New Testament’.

So, a little bit of rehabilitation. Why have I chosen James? The answer is simple:

Outside the gospels, the letter of James has a strong claim to be the closest we have to Jesus’s actually teaching, both in form and actual content. In terms of form what we have here is ‘a teacher in the style of Jesus’, a creative exponent of what we think of as wisdom writing. We tend to associate wisdom as a literary form with the Old Testament – above all with the Book of Proverbs, but also Job and Ecclesiastes, James stands in this tradition but what he gives us is traditional Jewish wisdom refracted through the life and teaching of Jesus. Where Paul supplies us with doctrine and argument and rhetoric, the epistle of James brings us closer to the oral teaching of Jesus, to the beatitudes, to the wise saying, the aphorism, the parables, the instructions on how to live life.

‘Be ye doers of the word, and not merely hearers’, for example, conjures a whole raft of Gospel references which places the emphasis not on belief, but on action. On the reality that ‘action speaks louder than words’: it echoes the parable of the Good Samaritan; the man who built his house upon a rock who for Jesus is the one who ‘comes to me, hears my words and acts on them’, or again the parable of the two sons, the one, who in response to a request from his father says ‘yes, of course’ and then doesn’t bother; and the one who says, ‘No’, but does what he is asked.

Like Jesus, James does not give us the comfort and intellectual pleasure of a doctrine or argument to wrestle with, but instead the wise saying as a starting point of contemplation; a personal challenge rather than the intellectual or aesthetic appreciation of a literary text. ‘Be ye doers of the word, and not merely hearers’ reminds us of the depth dimension of life, that we have a ‘dog in this fight’, our own soul, that real knowing involves doing; that real faithfulness involves the active pursuit of integrity and wholeness, and the development of habits and practices. To be a follower of God in Christ is not to read and ‘appreciate’ scripture, but to act, to perform the meaning of a text, to render it true not just to speak of it.

Which brings me turn to the scenario from our reading - contrasting the rich and the poor – a subject about which James, like Jesus, has strong words. He is talking about the very rich, on the one hand, who may well have the power to change or even transform the circumstances in which most of us live, and the poor, or that section of society which might be described as the ‘precariat’, those at the bottom of society, who live and work (if they do) precariously without recourse to stable occupational identities or dignity in the eyes of others. James is, of course, addressing neither the rich nor the poor: there will always be those who make gold monopoly sets or the equivalent and those who struggle at the margins - but James is talking to the rest of us, tempted by either or both - envy or disgust, avarice or aversion, tempted to treat these two groups of people very differently: to fawn or ignore. Note just how deep the ethical challenge cuts: of the person who exhibits favouritism, he suggests the question must be asked: DO you actually believe? Are you *really* a follower of Jesus? For according to James, to make such a distinction between people renders you a judge ‘with evil thoughts’ – in obvious contrast to the only true Judge, God himself.

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Here, James has simply taken Jesus at his word – you cannot serve two Masters, both God and Mammon – instead the Church is called to become a community in which solidarity with the poor replaces hierarchy and status; in which competitive ambition and arrogance are rooted out, overturned, rejected in favour of a community of genuine brothers and sisters bound to one another by relationships of equality and mutuality, equal before the cross rather than graded by status as the world determines. We are therefore called to cast off - in thought and word and action – all forms of status distinction and prejudice against the poor, and indeed to embrace the sort of partiality embodied within the community to which our collection goes this evening – Jimmy’s – which in addition to seeking to provide the material basics of food and a bed seeks to help those without homes, for whatever reason, to regain their confidence and self-esteem – in part this is achieved by the simple business of calling each and every individual who knocks on their door - not by the sorts of names that they might be used to, or the names that might come easily to many lips - but ‘a guest’ – a guest to be invited in – and with whom to break bread.