

James 2 : 1-11; 14-17

Introduction

A couple of Sundays ago we decided that before Rowan goes to big school he needs to have experienced a car boot sale. So off we went to the Woolaston one! Unlike a farmers' market there were no artisan sausage rolls or cheese to tempt him, but there were a lot of dogs and a lot of free-range children so we yomped up and down and from what I could see of the sellers' wares there must be a very active market for Haynes manuals. I must admit that seeing them reminded me of the many hours I spent with a can of WD40, a rag, some basic tools and the advice of the Haynes manual as I tried to keep my Fiat 127 running through the winter! So I can understand that collectors may enjoy a sense of nostalgia, looking back to simpler times when cars could be mended by novices at home because no computers were involved.

This morning's Bible reading from 'James'' letter is intended to be read and used as a Haynes manual for truly Christian worship and living. The tone is brisk, there is no room for nostalgia here, this is teaching to keep our Christian witness running on all cylinders! Eugene Peterson, in 'The Message', his paraphrase of the whole Bible (what a feat!) wraps up chapter 1 like this:

²⁶⁻²⁷ Anyone who sets himself up as "religious" by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world.' The Message

Looking at the passage

So what does 'James' teach us?

1. **Don't be in awe of material wealth.** In God's economy 'riches and poverty' have different definitions to those of the fallen world.

V. 5 – echoes Jesus' teaching in the Beatitudes 'Blessed are the poor in Spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.'

Material wealth does not indicate spiritual wealth. ('James' is writing to a Christian community who know this first hand - wealthy yet corrupt people oppress them.)

Instead, the poor inherit God's riches and it is they who we should cherish as they have spiritual wealth to share with us.

2. **Do keep the royal law.** V. 8 again brings us back to what we know: Jesus' teaching 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. 'James' is challenging a group that flatters the rich and degrades the poor. They have forgotten, or at least failed to act on their knowledge that Jesus told the story of the good Samaritan to demonstrate that 'our neighbours' aren't just the people like us, who we like easily, they are also the people who are totally unlike us and are even the people we would find it distasteful or distressing to live next door to. 'James' takes his point to its logical and damning conclusion: if church members only love their favourite sorts of people and fail to love even the most unworthy of the rest, they are disobeying Jesus' teaching.

3. You'll know you've got this right, that you have understood God's love in the world, described in the teaching of Jesus, when all your actions speak for themselves. Our reading stops short of the summing up of the argument. That's in v.18 (again from The Message) Faith and works, works and faith, fit together hand in glove.'

Friends, this is a good argument well made. Jesus isn't mentioned explicitly, but the references to his teaching are there. This is not meant as a doctrinal thesis, it's a practical handbook to help Christian people to live out their calling as children of God, and followers of the way of the cross.

None of this is new, and so I wonder, how are we getting on with making sure that our faith is demonstrated through our care for the poor and the vulnerable? Have we fallen into a habit of showing concern for 'people like us' or people that our society considers valuable and excluding everyone else? Worse still, have we fallen for the lie that material wealth and well-being is the measure of how good our life is and thus allowed our spirits to be impoverished?

I think these challenges are as old as humanity, but they have been intensified by our ever-increasing connectedness across the globe. We know so much more about people who live in poverty far, far away. We know that the impact of human activity in one region affects the environment and livelihoods of those in another. As I read this passage, I don't see that there is a boundary around which poor, 'homeless and loveless' people, or which neighbours I should consider when seeking to keep my faith and works 'hand in glove'.

And I have to face up to the fact that the 'reach' of my actions is far greater than the people I actually meet. The food I eat, the fuel I use, the clothes I wear and the way that I launder them, my behaviour on social media, the way that I use my time and invest my skills, they all impact people far away as well as close at hand. And a large number of them are poor, vulnerable to climate change and long for the wealth and freedoms that I enjoy. But how ever do I unpick all this? How do we all unpick this? How do we all support and encourage one another to take Jesus' teaching seriously enough to do something about all this, not just wave from a distance saying "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill". How do we supply the bodily needs of our poor global neighbours and enable them to live with long-term hopefulness for a healthy future? Well, part of the answer lies in how we do our shopping.

Here in Tidenham Parish, and in the town of Chepstow we have a great opportunity to chew over all this and to make a start if we haven't thought this way before, or to up our game in the light of the weather events and warfare we see on our screen and in our papers. It's Fairtrade fortnight! By certificating products the Fairtrade Association offers us a way of navigating some of the difficult choices that we face when we are trying to put our faith into action but can choose from so many products, and hear so many voices. (I am currently grappling with eco-friendly toilet rolls!) In 2023 UK sales of fairtrade goods created a £28M Fairtrade Premium which directly benefited farmers and workers' and their communities. Their website offers lots of information and we have knowledgeable reps here in our churches who can help and advise us so that our morning cuppa or our lunch box banana reaches out across the supply chain with a fair price and compassion for the daily needs of our neighbours far away, but close to God's heart.