

Reflection for Pentecost 14 by Megan Cambridge

How do we become a disciple of Jesus Christ who thrives, whose faith grows exponentially? How do we apply the principles Jesus laid out for his disciples more than 2,000 years ago to life in our 21st century culture? How do we develop a faith that works? James gets right to the heart of the matter of discipleship. He asks, "Who is God to you?" Then James wants to know, "Who are you to God?" And finally, "What are you going to do about it?"

It seems that everywhere else in the New Testament, we are urged to speak boldly, to proclaim the gospel at every opportunity. James, however, suddenly sounds a lot like Jesus, turning what we expect to hear on its head. "Know this, beloved," he says. "Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry."

The book of James looks a bit like the Old Testament book of Proverbs dressed up in New Testament clothes. It's focus on practical action in the life of faith is reminiscent of the Wisdom Literature in the Old Testament, encouraging God's people to act like God's people. The pages of James are filled with direct commands to pursue a life of holiness. He makes no excuses for those who do not measure up. In the mind of this early church leader, Christians evidence their faith by walking in certain ways and not others. For James, a faith that does not produce real life change is a faith that is worthless (James 2:17). James speaks to authenticity and of practical Christianity. James asks is it real, is it true, is it authentic?

Today is the start of a series of readings from the epistle of James. It is acknowledged as the earliest of the New Testament letters and was written to converted Jews abroad, spread, no doubt, as a result of persecution. Although writing to groups of people he looks at the personal and individual level. It is only 100 verses long but provides a very practical guide reflecting, as it does, much of what Jesus says in the Beatitudes and referencing the two commandments given by Jesus as encompassing all that is needed. I hope you will take time not just to encounter the snippets each week in the pew sheet but to read the letter to yourself from start to finish.

James, unlike Paul, stresses the importance of works, not because we are saved by works – we are saved by grace – but because works flow from the life changing impact of true belief.

For James, faith was no abstract proposition but had effects in the real world. James offered numerous practical examples to illustrate his point: faith endures in the midst of trials, calls on God for wisdom, bridles the tongue, sets aside wickedness, visits orphans and widows, and does not play favourites. He stressed that the life of faith is comprehensive, impacting every area of our lives and driving us to truly engage in the lives of other people in the world. While James recognized that even believers stumble (James 3:2), he also knew that faith should not coexist with people who roll their eyes at the less fortunate, ignore the plight of others, or curse those in their paths. James places the spotlight on the necessity for believers to act in accordance with our faith and asks how well do our actions mirror the faith that we proclaim? James is a keen observer of human nature and noticed the generous acts, the small gifts, the gestures and the words we use. He knew that such acts are the nuts and bolts of everyday life, holding together the framework on which we build community and social order. In his epistle he focuses on and shows concern for the way we use words, knowing they can make a big difference in the way we relate to each other. James counsels us to a practical morality that is quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger. What we do matters and also what we say, what comes out of our mouths can make a difference for good or ill. Does that ring any bells? Jesus in our gospel reading this morning is very clear it is what comes out of us that defiles us not what we take in. Actions add value to our words and give them life.

James promotes taking control of our anger. If we exercise self-control we are better decision makers and builders of community. He encourages us to be responsible taking seriously our emotional lives, our religious faith and our behaviour. At the time of writing James' letter helped dispersed people to live as God's holy people in the tension between faith and culture and it is still helpful and relevant today. James stresses the gift of the father from above, the otherworldly source of our help for moral living. It brings faith to maturity and produces actual deeds. Despite their dispersed and challenging situations, the recipients of the epistle (and us) are to persist in moral living and bear fruit as intended by their creator. Our actions too are to be the first fruits of our belief. In Jewish tradition, the first fruits were the offering brought to the temple at the beginning of harvest. These offerings were perfect examples of the produce that had been grown. They were given to God in thanksgiving for a good crop, and they served as down payment on offerings that would be brought when the harvest was complete.

These communities to whom James wrote were subject to pressures and enticements of their surrounding society as we are. James understands in these communities there is heated disputes so he urges them to be quick to listen and slow to speak. He would have sat in communities where contention fractured itself observing human anger that does not produce the sort of results that will put things right. James is very blunt. He doesn't prevaricate or indulge in euphemism but employs clear imperative. Seeing beyond ourselves is perhaps the hardest and certainly one of the most consistent challenges of faith, because we experience life in the first-person. We are always inside our own heads. James challenges us to step back and look at the whole picture of how we live out our faith, by refocusing the mirror on God; seeing God in others, seeing God in our lives. James tells us the next time we look at ourselves in the mirror, stop, take a few breaths and after checking our hair, our teeth and our outfits, check to see where God is.

So, over these next few weeks as we read the letter from James, perhaps we can focus on those areas that he mentions; our actions during trials, our treatment of those less fortunate, the way we speak and relate to others, and the role that money plays in how we live our life. We should allow James to encourage us to do good, according to the faith we proclaim.