

A sermon given on Sunday 2nd September 2018 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: **James chapter 1**

(Lectionary reading for Proper 17, Year B is James 1:17-27)

The Gospel reading set for the day is Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23.

Introduction: Attitude

*The Ballad of the Oyster*¹

There once was an oyster
whose story I tell,
who found that some sand
had got into his shell.

It was only a grain,
but it gave him great pain;
for oysters have feelings
although they're so plain.

Now, did he berate
the harsh workings of fate
that had brought him to such
a deplorable state?

Did he curse at the government,
cry for election,
and claim that the sea
should have given him protection?

No! He said to himself
as he lay on a shell,
"Since I cannot remove it,
I'll try to improve it."

Now the years have rolled by,
as the years always do,
and he came to his ultimate
destiny – stew.

And the small grain of sand
that had bothered him so
was a beautiful pearl
all richly aglow.

Now the tale has a moral:
for isn't it grand
what an oyster can do
with a small grain of sand?

What couldn't we do
if we'd only begin
with some of the things
that get under our skin?

James begins the body of his letter with these words:

² My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy,
³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; ⁴ and let endurance
have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing. (NRSV)

We're to have the attitude of the oyster in the poem. Instead of complaining about the trials and tribulations of life, we should welcome them as opportunities to develop character. The word order that James actually uses in the original Greek puts it even more strongly: "All joy count it, my brothers and sisters, whenever you encounter trials of various kinds".

It seems a rather bizarre way to begin a letter. But in some ways, the letter of James is a rather bizarre letter. It is addressed to a number of Christian communities scattered over the known world, and consists of teaching on a number of practical aspects of life and how we should behave as Christians. There's no explanation of doctrine, like you would find in the letters of Paul. James is intensely practical.

¹ From *Still more Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks*, compiled by Wayne Rice (Zondervan, 1999)

And what more practical topic to start with than how to face troubles in your life? In a sense, the way James deals with this issue is the key to the whole of the first chapter, and even of the whole letter.

You see, what James is saying is that what matters is not the situation we are in, but our *attitude* towards it, and the way we *behave*. What God wants, says James, is not people who know all the doctrine and can say all the right words, but real Christian disciples who know God and actually do what he wants. You may remember that Jesus said something similar:

‘Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord”, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven.’

(Matthew 7:21 NRSV)

This chapter covers a lot of different topics, which I will cover briefly today. But if you want to encapsulate the message of today’s sermon, and the message of the letter of James very simply, remember this formula:

A + B = CD

Attitude plus Behaviour equals Christian Discipleship.

A + B = CD

I said a moment ago that there’s no explanation of doctrine in James. That’s not quite true. Verses 17 and 18 of this first chapter have a little reminder about the character of God (generous and unchanging), his purposes for his creation and the new birth that Christians have experienced:

¹⁷ Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸ In fulfilment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. (NRSV)

What we know about the goodness of God, and what we have experienced ourselves in coming to faith in Jesus Christ, should be the basis of our attitude to life. And our attitude to life leads into the way we behave. So if we know that God is kind, and we have experienced his kindness ourselves, we should have an attitude of kindness towards others which shows itself in acts of kindness. What we know about God, and what we have experienced of him, informs our attitude, which in turn is reflected in our behaviour.

Practical Religion

Let’s look at how this plays out in chapter 1. And in doing so, we will get a sneak preview of the topics for the other 4 sermons in this series. Chapter 1 of James touches on a number of topics which James will explore in more detail in chapters 2 to 5.

We began with James’s comments about the **trials of life** (verses 2 to 4). These can help us to develop the quality of endurance, patience or steadfastness, just as an oyster turns a grain of sand into a pearl.

Thinking laterally, James comments that in such a situation we may also need **wisdom**, and reminds us in verses 5-6 that if we need wisdom we have only to ask God “who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly”. But we need to really believe that God will give us his wisdom – don’t start doubting God, or you’ll just be like a wave tossed to and fro. We need to be single-minded, not double-minded, vacillating and unstable.

Next (verses 9-11), James touches on the theme of **social and economic status**: as Mary says in the Magnificat², God brings down the rich and powerful and exalts the humble and meek. Worldly status can disappear overnight like a fading flower. (Here James is paraphrasing Isaiah 40:6-8.)

² Luke 1:46-55

Rather, we should see things God's way. If we are lowly, God will raise us up. If rich, God will bring us down. Get used to it!

Temptation is the next topic James addresses (verses 12-16). Don't blame God when you're tempted. Recognise that temptation comes from inside you. I'm reminded here of Jesus' words in Mark 7:18-23, where he says that what makes a person unclean is not what goes into them but what comes out of their heart – sexual immorality, theft, greed, pride etc. Blindly following your desires may lead you into sin. By contrast (verses 17-18), God is the giver of all good things. He's not like a shadow that moves with the sun. He's constant, dependable, not fickle and likely to change his mind. His goodness has been shown in bringing us to new birth, so that we might be "a kind of firstfruits of his creatures" (18).

The firstfruits were the first gleanings or the first fruit picked in the harvest, which were offered to God. The idea is that we offer ourselves to God, and we are representative of the full harvest he wants to reap in the world. So if we're the firstfruits of God's harvest, we need to behave like it. In verses 19-27 James gives 3 ways we should do this.

First, says James, we need to **take control of our behaviour** – more listening and less speaking, less anger, less immoral behaviour (perhaps a better translation than "sordidness" in the NRSV), and a lot more humility and listening to God's word (verses 19-21). If you want to take this teaching seriously, why not spend some time today listening to your conscience? Consider whether there are any areas of your life that are not pleasing to God. Be honest. What changes do you think God might be wanting you to make? Pray about them, write them down and make a plan for putting things right.

Secondly, we need to **not only hear the word but put it into practice** (verses 22-25). Not doing so, according to James, is about as stupid as looking at your face in the mirror and then going away and forgetting what you look like. Who does that? When you leave church today, will you switch off spiritually and forget what God has said to you in the service? Or will you think about it and do something about it? If you do, James promises, you will find a blessing in it (v25). So if you think that all this discipleship sounds like rather hard work, this is a promise for you: if you put God's word into practice your life, and the lives of those around you, will be see a change for the better.

One practical application that James is really concerned about control of the tongue, so he mentions it specifically in verse 26. There will be much more about this in chapter 3 (our sermon on 15th September).

Thirdly, James rounds off chapter 1 with a simple definition of practical religion: **caring for the disadvantaged and not letting yourself be influenced by worldly values** (verse 27).

Conclusion

I think the message of James is of vital importance for all of us who profess to be Christians today. In today's world, it's often difficult to know what to believe. Is what you have read on the internet true, or is it "fake news"? Companies may try to create an image of being environmentally friendly or socially responsible, but do their working practices bear this out? Politicians make great promises, but are they actually committed to delivering what they promise?

Religion often has a bad press. People pounce on hypocrisy, and seek to discredit those who don't practise what they preach. What people respect is authenticity. So am I an authentic disciple of Jesus? Are you? This is what James is getting at. Do you remember the formula?

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How do you measure up? How does St Michael's Church measure up? In the coming weeks, we will explore what being an authentic disciple means. You could use this as a kind of spiritual MOT.

Why not set aside some time to read a few verses of James every day and pray about what it means for your life and for our church? Or look up the sermon on the church website and read it through prayerfully. As we reflect and pray about the topics that are raised, God will show us if there are ways we could become more authentic disciples of Jesus. Are you up for the challenge?

There is also a short introduction to the letter of James (2 sides of A4), which I've written to help you make sense of the book and the whole sermon series. There are copies at the back of church. You can also find it at <http://www.stmichaels-sandhurst.org.uk/september-2018-services.html>

Prayer

Lord Jesus, help us to be doers of the word, not merely hearers. May our religion be practical. You are the Way, the Truth and the Life. Help us to listen to your truth, to follow in your way and to live your life, that we may bring glory to your name. Amen.