

Sermon: Faith and Works: James part 2  
Sunday 19 November 2017, Cashmere Presbyterian Church  
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A sermon in two parts today, a game of two halves. First, a reflection on this central challenge of James, 'Be do-ers of the word', for those of you who enjoy getting on doing faith. Second, a bit more historical background, for those of you who enjoy a good puzzle.

But before we get started, a joke. I'm not very good with jokes, but I promise to try one every now and then and you can tell me whether it is a good idea or a bad idea.

*A strong young man at a construction site was bragging that he could outdo anyone in a contest of strength. He made a special target of one of the older workmen. After several minutes, the older worker had enough.*

*"Why don't you put your money where your mouth is?" he said. "I will bet a week's wages that I can haul something in a wheelbarrow over to that shed that you won't be able to wheel back."*

*"You're on, old man," the braggart replied. "Let's see what you got."*

*The old man reached out and grabbed the wheelbarrow by the handles. Then, nodding to the young man, he said, "All right. Get in."*

Put your money where your mouth is. I think James would have agreed with the sentiment, absolutely.

And it resonates with Kiwi culture, too, don't you think, to be pragmatic, practical. We prefer action to words. We instinctively mistrust "pissing in the wind", and we prefer to get on with it. Classic example of course, Jacinda's "*Let's do this*" slogan. Short, simple, practical. James would have liked that, absolutely.

James would definitely have agreed with the Mental Health Foundation including giving as one of the keys to wellbeing. Give and care in practical ways is definitely one of the central messages in the letter of James. Obviously poverty and inequality were big issues in his day, as they are in our times. James had heard well-off people telling poor people: 'Have a nice day ... and please get yourself a decent jersey or you'll catch your death of cold.' ... James had no time for pompous well-wishing. If someone can't afford a decent jersey, help them out! If someone is hungry, invite them for a meal!

And James was deeply concerned when he saw social status creeping into the church. He saw wealthy important people being given the best seats in church while the smelly odd people were politely sent to the back. James had no time for that! Stop it! he said. Treat everyone the same, for all are equally valuable to God. Don't just love those who look like you. Don't just respect those who have it all together.

Listen to the word of God, not to the world, James says. Live out the values of the Kingdom, not the values of society, James says.

verse 25: *"whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do."*

James has been a controversial book. Over the centuries some people argued for it to get thrown out of the Bible. Martin Luther disliked James. Central to the Reformation were the slogans 'Solo Fide' – in faith alone and 'Solo Gracia' – by grace alone. We do not earn God's acceptance by ticking the boxes through 'Good Works', argued Luther. He thought that James goes against a theology of grace, and salvation by faith alone.

Funny, I don't read James like that at all. I read in James a passionate advocate of personal and communal integrity. Practice what you preach. Live out what you believe. Put your money where your mouth is. And this conviction is especially hard-nosed around issues of inequality. Faith in action must connect with real people in real need, says James. And this must be a challenge for us. Especially Cashmere, up here on our well-off hill, looking down on the city, safely removed from the hunger and struggles of those who cannot afford a decent jersey even at the op-shop.

James for me is about integrity, and that will also confront those of us who claim a faith in Christ because we never fully live this out, we're always caught with a foot in the kingdom and a foot in the world. So James' words will always be hard to hear.

So, have a stretch, stand up turn around if you want ... and we're onto the second half of the sermon.

I talked last week about who was leading the early church, first the apostles, the 12 disciples of Jesus, then elders were appointed, then the apostles left on their own mission journeys, leaving James behind in Jerusalem to lead the church. And last week I promised that this week I tell you more about who James was. But it turns out that this is easier said than done because it is actually something of a puzzle. There are several men called James in the New Testament.

The first puzzle is why they are called James at all, for this is a strange English invention and not the correct name at all. The men called James in the New Testament are actually called Jacob in the original texts ... translated Jacobus into Greek, the very same Hebrew name for Jacob the patriarch of Israel. Elisabeth was asking me about this last week because she speaks several languages and was puzzling about why we get James in English. It's a case of 'a funny thing happened on the way' in translation from the Greek into the Latin and then into the English. I believe that it was a deliberate error on the part of the translators. Basically those translating the Bible wanted the names of people in the New Testament to sound different than the names of people in the Old Testament. So we find in the New Testament a book by someone called Jude, but his name is the same as Judah, one of the sons of Jacob. And all the women called Mary really have the same name as Miriam, etc etc. I believe that this stemmed from a need on behalf of Bible translators for Christian people to not sound Jewish. It is a sad blight on our history as Christian church that we have so distanced ourselves from our Jewish origins and blamed the Jews and oppressed the Jews.

So, the Bible translators deliberately changed the 'b' of Jacob into an 'm' for James. I don't quite know what happened to the middle 'c' but that got dropped in the English. So Jacob became Jacobus which became Jacomus which became Ja-ames.

As for which James is which, that is an intriguing biblical puzzle which actually hinges on the various mothers and fathers. One of the most fascinating things for me in digging into the question of who lead the early church is the hidden role of the women. It's a puzzle because each of the gospels gives us slightly different information about each of these

women and how they are related to each other and the men. I won't drag you deep into all this, but if you're interested look it up at home. Look at each of the four gospels at the lists of women who witnessed the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. This tells us the core group of women who knew Jesus and who were close around the central group of 12 apostles. These were Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and a 3<sup>rd</sup> Mary who was the mother of James and the wife of Alphaeus, and Salome who was the wife of Zebedee and the mother of James and John, and also Joanna.

A strong possibility is that Alphaeus was the brother of Joseph from Bethlehem; so Mary the wife of Alphaeus was probably the sister-in-law of Mary the mother of Jesus. So Jesus' own aunt and uncle were actively involved in this community, and James could well have been Jesus' first cousin. So when people later refer to James as the brother of the Lord they could easily mean the cousin of Jesus, because in Aramaic there is no word for cousin. In Aramaic the words for 'brother' or 'sister' just refer to close relatives – obviously a culture in which extended family was the norm.

Anyway, that is my reading of it all. Lots of other biblical scholars disagree. But for me it rings true that one of Jesus' closest disciples, one of the chosen 12, should be a blood relative, a cousin. Why not? This means that James, together with his mother and his father, were deeply involved in his ministry, knew him and respected his teaching and even though he was cousin and nephew they came to know him as Lord and Son of God. I love the intimacy of this ... they who knew him his whole life long.

So I'm claiming that Jesus' cousin on his father's side was James who became the leader of the church in Jerusalem, while his cousin on his mother's side was John the Baptist.

Question is, does it matter? Yes it matters that the people who wrote the New Testament knew Jesus themselves, or heard directly from those who did.

The book of James does not tell stories about Jesus. It does not quote his words but it does ring true with what Jesus said. Heaps of the lines in James echo directly the words of Jesus. James has not heard about Jesus third or 4<sup>th</sup> hand. He was there. That matters to me.

And it matters to me that leadership is about community, and includes both women and men. The book of James rings true with Jesus, and it rings true for church community, the issues of inequality and status, the challenge to live with integrity, the role of prayer, practical issues like gossip and confidentiality, the call to seek peace and genuine love in community, despite our differences.

I'd like to finish my story about James with this verse, 3:17-18:

*the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. <sup>18</sup> And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for<sup>[a]</sup> those who make peace.*

Amen to that!