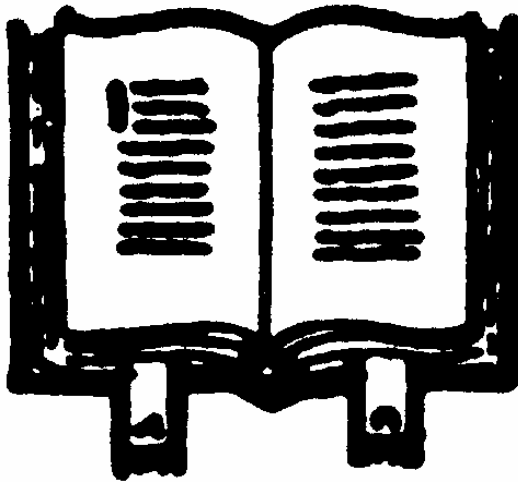


Bible Notes

October-December

2006



The Epistle of James

50p

October 1st

James 1 v1

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting.

This quarter, something entirely different – a verse by verse commentary on the Epistle of James. Most of the letters (or epistles) in the New Testament are attributed to S Paul. Towards the end, however, there are a few other short, less well known, letters by other writers. The James who wrote this letter is traditionally believed to be the brother of Jesus. [There are several men described as Jesus' brothers (Matt 13.55). These may have been younger brothers, but, if Mary remained a virgin, they must have been older half brothers born to Joseph in a previous marriage or perhaps simply cousins.] Many scholars, however, believe that this epistle was written too late to have been by a member of the Lord's family.

James describes himself as a servant – a slave even – of God. That is a good way for Christians to see themselves. He calls the Church the twelve tribes, because Christians are the new Israel. We inherit the promises made to Israel in the Old Testament and they are transcended in the mission to the whole world. *Scattered abroad* is the English translation of Diaspora. The Diaspora are the Jews who do not live in the Holy Land. They are scattered throughout the world, but their true home is Israel¹. Christians too are presently scattered throughout the world, but their true home is in Heaven.

October 2nd

James 1 v2

My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations.

I have always thought this strange, given that Jesus teaches us to pray, *Lead us not into temptation*. I think the answer is that Christians ought to be able to find joy in every situation. Jesus is always with us, wherever we are, whatever is happening to us. We can use any trial or temptation as an opportunity to grow stronger.

¹ I'm speaking figuratively. This is not a comment on modern middle eastern politics. Jews, like Gentiles, can find their true home in Heaven through Jesus. Whether or not they live in Israel while on earth, there is no justification for dispossessing the Palestinians or other races, neither have other races any right to persecute the Jews.

October 3rd

James 1 vv 3&4

Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.

They say that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. One of the great Christian virtues is 'υπομονη hupomone. The word is translated here as *patience*. It also has the sense of endurance, perseverance, steadfastness. Being a Christian is something we don't give up on. We don't get discouraged when the going gets tough. We might be opposed by other people. We might feel overwhelmed by life's demands. We might be confused by unanswerable questions. We might simply be bored and spiritually cold. But the point is that we don't give up. We cleave to God and He cleaves to us. If we cling on to God through thick and thin, that very experience makes us stronger Christians.

Use it or lose it can be as true of faith as it is of muscle tone.

October 4th

James 1 v5

If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.

Another great Christian virtue is wisdom. Would you say that you are a wise person? Can you think of anyone who is wise? Wisdom somehow seems slightly unfashionable in the modern world. What do you mean by wisdom?

James tells us that wisdom is something we certainly need. We are to ask God for it. True wisdom is spiritual wisdom. We are taught that *the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom*. Jesus is described as *the wisdom of God and the power of God*. Wisdom is certainly something to be desired, more valuable than rubies. What is wisdom and where does it come from?

Wisdom comes from communing with God in prayer, from reading and meditating upon the Bible, from being an active worshipping member of a Church. Ask God for wisdom and He will not turn you away. But ask humbly and patiently or you may mistake your own preferences for the wisdom of God.

October 5th

James 1 vv 6&7

But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord.

Jesus said that faith as small as grain of mustard seed would be sufficient to move a mountain. So what does James mean here? Is there such a thing as inadequate faith? No, there isn't. All faith is good. The man with the demon-possessed son could say to Jesus, *Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.* It is God Who moves the mountain, not you or your faith. Your faith is what connects you to God.

Either you are a Christian or you are not. You might be a weak, doubtful Christian, but if you are Christ's, Christ's you are. It all depends on Him, not you. You cleave to Him by faith, how ever weak your faith is. James here is not decrying the honest doubt, the honest weakness which can affect any insincere seeker after the Truth. Indeed one might doubt the sincerity and honesty of someone who claimed always to have no doubt or uncertainty.

What James is saying is that it is impossible for those who will not commit. How ever much faith you have or how ever little, you have to commit to God if you want to see the fruits of faith.

October 6th

James 1 v8

A double minded man is unstable in all his ways.

You cannot serve God and Mammon, says Jesus. Who is on the Lord's side? Who will serve the King?

You do have to make up your mind on the strength of the evidence you have, the faith you have received. There was no proof that you made the right choice when you got married, no proof that you chose the right career, no proof that enabled you to make the right choice in many of life's crucial decisions. You had to make up your mind and act in faith. Just as you can't decently marry one woman and have an affair with another or get paid for one job while doing private work in the firm's time with the firm's tools, neither can you serve God and Mammon. If you are a Christian, you have to be whole-hearted about. God comes first, last and everywhere in between!

October 7th

James 1 vv 9-11

Let the brother of degree rejoice in that he is exalted: But the rich in that he is made low: because as the flower of the grass he shall pass away. For the sun is no sooner risen with a burning heat, but it withereth the grass, and the flower thereof falleth, and the grace of the fashion of it perisheth: so also shall the rich man fade away in his ways. Many of the early Christians were poor people, slaves even. They had very little in this life. So they seized on the opportunity to become members of the Christian community, to receive Jesus, to participate in worship, to know the power of prayer, to share their possessions with others and to rest secure in the hope of Heaven. Rich people sometimes joined the Church, but their spiritual perceptions were blunted by their material wealth. They did not really need Jesus, they thought, if they had money in the bank. For that reason, their career and their position in society mattered more to them than their membership of the Church. They were used to being in the front of the queue and getting the best seats for everything on earth. They took it for granted that they would be similarly privileged in Heaven. James warns the rich and rejoices in the spiritual wealth of the poor. Now, we are probably rich in James' terms. So what do we learn from these verses?

October 8th

James 1 v12

Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him. Temptation is testing or trying. That is why one translation of the Lord's Prayer uses the words *Do not bring us to the time of trial* instead of *Lead us not into temptation*. James is probably writing to people for whom the time of trial was actual, possibly life-threatening, persecution. What temptations, however, are you and I called to endure? What is our time of trial? What might make us deny Jesus by what we say, by what we do or by what we are? If we were about to be burnt at the stake for our beliefs, the issues would be clear. We would either confess Jesus and die or deny Him and walk away in shame. Things are usually much less clear than that, however. Do we deny Jesus when we use our own time, talents and money selfishly? Do we deny Him when we can't be bothered with other people? Do we deny Him when we stay away from Church?

October 9th

James 1 v13

Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man.

Well what about when God tempted Abraham to sacrifice Isaac? Surely God does test us or try us or, indeed tempt us, in that sense. Why else would St Paul say that God does not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear? We are tempted and, as nothing happens outside of God's providence, He must at least permit our temptation.

I think James is making a more subtle point here. We cannot blame God for our failures. We cannot say that God is responsible when we go wrong. St Paul adds that there is always a way to escape from temptation (1 Corinthians 10 v13). God does allow us to be tested for our own good. We learn patience, steadfastness and endurance from these trials. We would never develop our spiritual physique without resistance. No pain, no gain! It is not, however, His fault when we give into temptation and, when we do, the only course of action is to accept responsibility, confess and receive forgiveness.

October 10th

James 1 v14

But every man is tempted, when is he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed.

When we use the word *lust* it is hard not to think of sexual sin. Sexual desire is powerful and it has led a lot of people astray. James is not speaking only about sex, however. This word *lust* covers all strong desires or inclinations, specifically those which turn us away from God. We might be greedy for money, too worried about other people's opinions, selfish, obsessed with our career or house or garden. There are so many human desires which entice us away from God – taking up our time, using up our resources, draining us of all our energies. Ordinary human living so fills our lives that God gets pushed into the background before being finally forgotten. What entices you and me away from God?

October 11th

James 1 v15

Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.

What do you really want out of life? What are you prepared to do in order to get it? Obviously, sexual lust leads to fornication. Greed may lead to dishonesty. Covetousness ruins friendships. Ambition may make us do other people down. Pride may make us despise others. Anything which takes up our time and energy can lead to sins of omission. We fail in our duty to God and other people because we are too busy looking after our own concerns. Ordinary human passions and desires lead us to do what we really know is wrong or to fail to do what we know to be right and so they cut us off from God. Cut off from God, we are cut off from life. And that is the paradox. You gain the world and lose your soul.

October 12th

James 1 vv 16&17

Do not err, my beloved brethren, Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.

The first thing to notice is that, even when James is moaning about other Christians, he still calls them *beloved brethren*. We should always remember that we are all *beloved brethren* when we are complaining about one another and criticizing.

The second point to notice is that all good things come from God. The Devil's great lie is that what really makes you happy is worldly things, that what you really need are things like wealth, power, sex, worldly position, possessions, status etc. Another related lie is that Christians give up everything that makes life worth living now in the hope of *pie in the sky when we die*. In fact, we actually lead a happier, more fulfilled, life on earth, here and now, if we live God's way, a wonderful life on earth which is a foretaste of an infinitely more wonderful life in Heaven. So let go and let God. Stop pursuing worldly things as first priority and God as a spare time activity. Live for God and demonstrate to yourself and to other people the truth of what James is saying.

October 13th

James 1 v18

Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first-fruits of his creatures.

What it means to be a Christian! It was God's choice. He decided to redeem the world. He chose us. He sent Jesus into the world. Jesus is the Word. Jesus is the truth. He is the only-begotten Son of God. He has given power that those who receive Him should become the sons of God. We are those people, the people who believe on His Name. We should never lose the sense of privilege. We can talk to God and call Him Father. We are brothers and sisters of Jesus. We are His people. I really do not understand how people can be so half-hearted about their Christianity.

First-fruits of his creatures. The first fruits of the Harvest are offered to God in order that the whole crop should be sanctified. We are consecrated to God, we have life in Him, coheirs with Christ in the Heavenly Kingdom, as the first fruits of the whole of creation. We are the light which enlightens the world. We are the leaven which leavens the lump. Our privilege in being redeemed now is that we are witnesses to the world so that millions more may come to the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ, in knowledge of Whom there is eternal life.

October 14th

James 1 vv19&20

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.

It seems obvious that the wise person will be more eager to listen than to speak. Perhaps most of us are not very wise, because most of us are much quicker to speak than to listen. We just wait for a pause in the conversation to get our remarks in without weighing the other person's points sufficiently either to learn from them or to make a proper reply.

There's quite a lot of discussion about whether wrath is ever appropriate for a Christian. Jesus seems to have been wrathful when He expelled the money changers. Paul talks about not letting the sun go down on our wrath, advice I have often heard dished out to married couples. It is sometimes hard not to be wrathful. There can even be a righteous anger at injustice. But what does wrath achieve? Not very much, I suspect.

October 15th

James 1 v 21

Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word which is able to save your souls.

What does James mean by the engrafted word? Christians commonly think of the Bible when they talk about the Word of God. The Bible certainly does bring us the Word and it is good to spend time reading the Bible thoughtfully and prayerfully. James, of course, did not have our Bible. He only had what we call the Old Testament and maybe the sight of some other documents which would eventually become part of the New Testament. Never despise the Old Testament. It is Jesus' Bible.

I think, however, he means more than the Old Testament when he speaks of the *engrafted word*. It is the word which has been proclaimed by preaching. This is the word they have received and believed and it has become part of them. The word is engrafted in them. It has the power to save. The word is Jesus. Jesus is one with the Spirit, the Spirit Who dwells in the heart of every believer, enabling us to call God *Father* as Jesus does. Paul recognises that the flesh (basic human nature) lusts against the Spirit. James is making the same point using other language, other metaphors. The point, however, is the same. Go with the Word, the Spirit, not the lusts of the flesh, those ordinary human desires which lead to sin and alienation from God and therefore eternal death.

October 16th

James 1 vv 22-24

But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself and goeth his way, and forgetteth what manner of man he was. Psalm-singing hypocrites. So I have heard Christian congregations described. We read the Bible, hear the sermon, pray, receive Jesus the Word in Holy Communion and we are no better than anyone else. We hear the word, we know the story but we don't act on it. Small wonder if others don't join us.

October 17th

James 1 v25

But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.

There is potentially a lot more to faith than the worldly religion which so often passes for Christianity in this country. There is a law – the Law of God. Paradoxically, this is not a law of restrictions and limitations. It is a law of liberty. It is the Truth which sets us free. This law is Jesus and if we hold up this Law to our faces like a mirror, we see where our lives fall short. The Law is Love and wherever we are unloving we are falling short. Looking at this Law, we repent, we are set free, we are born again, we are renewed in the image of Christ. We have eternal life and are filled with the Holy Spirit. We are blessed because we are living the life of Christ, doing His work, God’s work, in the world.

Or we can come to church, half listen to the readings, doze through the sermon, close our dusty Bibles and go back to leading an ordinary untransformed human life. Worse still, we can listen attentively, debate what the Bible means, even pass exams in it and still fail to let it transform our lives.

October 18th

James 1 v26

If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man’s religion is in vain.

Gossiping, whingeing, unfair criticism, shouting down, greedily demanding, belittling, shaming, lying, denying Christ, challenging, insulting. There are a few sins I can think of that we commit with our tongues. Can you think of any more?

The point is that we deceive ourselves if we claim to be Christians but do not act like Christians.

October 19th

James 1 v 27

Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

It is easy to say that it is so hard to be a Christian. Nothing is simple. It's all so complex, hard to understand, hard to know what to do. But it isn't. It's obvious what sort of people we are supposed to be if we claim to be the children of God.

October 20th

James 2 v1

My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons.

Everyone is equal. That is not some communist manifesto. It is an intrinsic part of our faith. God made all of us in His own image. Jesus died for every one of us. You cannot get more precious or more important than that. Moreover, when the Lord of glory chose to become human, He chose to take the form of a slave, to be born in a stable, a member of a poor family, in an insignificant village in an out of the way part of a troubled Roman Province. Christians should treat every human being with respect. This does not mean kowtowing to the rich. It does not mean ingratiating ourselves with the powerful. It does not mean despising the outcast or patronising the poor. If we do not give too much respect to rank in the world, still less should we "respect persons" in the Church. Every member of the Church is equally valuable and equally deserving of respect.

October 21st

James 2 vv 2-5

For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; and ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor; Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: Are ye not then partial in yourselves and are become judges of evil thoughts?

These verses always make me uncomfortable about the way you all stand up while I process to my special seat at the front of the Church or when the mayor comes to Church and we all stand to escort her to her special seat. These practices are only justifiable if the point is accepted

that we stand for what the priest or bishop or mayor represents, not because we think they are any more deserving of respect than any other human being created in God's image.

It used to be the case that better off families paid for their own pews while working class people sat or stood where they could. I hope they squirmed in their plush pews when these verses were the appointed lesson.

We are told that black Christians coming from the Caribbean to our churches in the 1950s felt unwelcome.

On what grounds might we discriminate today? Race? Class? Dress? Age? I'm sure we would say that we don't discriminate, but maybe we need to hold up the mirror of Christ in front of our hearts. Being honest, I feel most comfortable in a church full of people who talk like me, dress like me and who like the same style of worship that I like. I hope you can honestly say that you are more open.

October 22nd

James 2 v5

Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?

You can imagine a mostly poor congregation back in James' day. They have heard the preaching, joined the Church and been liberated from the drudgery of their daily lives by membership of a loving, worshipping, spirit-filled community. But time wears on; the initial excitement wears off. Worldly cares crowd in. Being a Christian becomes merely part of the daily routine. Then their evangelism begins to bear fruit. They get some new converts, including a few rich people. With this new money, they can build the hall they want. The community can be much more generous in the support it gives to widows. It seems natural to look up to these new Christians, the people you call *sir* in every day life, to give them good seats, to defer to their opinions. Gradually the Church becomes just like any other worldly philanthropic society. The patrons get used to patronising, other people get used to being patronised and everyone is diminished. The Church is doing a lot more, its survival looks more certain, but is it still a Church?

October 23rd

James 2 vv 6&7

But ye have despised the poor. Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats? Do not they blaspheme that worthy name by which ye are called?

It is a terrible thing for a Christian to despise anyone. It is not even sensible to try to accommodate the Church to the world's values. It is the world's values which will destroy the Church. Compromising with the world won't make the Church grow. It might seem to protect us from persecution, but only because there is no longer any need to persecute. The Devil, the wicked world, doesn't feel threatened by a half-hearted, worldly Church. A Church which is truly to grow, not merely in numbers of people, but in numbers of Christians, must be faithful to Christian principles – as we shall see tomorrow.

October 24th

James 2 v8

If ye fulfil the royal law according to the Scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well.

That is the essence of Christianity, Love, Love of God and Love of our fellow human beings. Jesus said it. You find it in the Scriptures, the Old Testament. But, who is my neighbour? Who is this person I am supposed to love as I love myself? According to Jesus, the man who fell among thieves on the Jericho road discovered that his neighbour was a Samaritan, a despised Samaritan. Whom are you tempted to despise? Well, he is your neighbour.

October 25th

James 2 vv 9&10

But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin and are convinced of the law as transgressors. For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.

Christianity comes as a package. You are for Jesus or you are against Him. You either walk with God or you don't. There is no such thing as Christianity lite, where you choose those bits you like and, for the rest, accommodate your faith to the world and your own personal beliefs. You can't pick and choose. If Jesus says you've got to love those unlovely people, you've just got to get on and do it.

October 26th

James 2 v11

For he that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill. Now if thou commit no adultery, yet if thou kill, thou art become a transgressor of the law.

It is often easy to see what is wrong in the abstract. We can recognise that it would be wrong to do a whole host of things which we are not the least bit tempted to do or which we do not have the opportunity to do even if we are tempted. It is also very easy to see what other people are doing wrong. The grain of sawdust in someone else's eye is very easy to see. Yet, when it comes down to us, we cannot see that what we are doing is wrong or, if it is wrong, it is perfectly understandable and easily forgivable. No, the Law is the same for everyone. The Law is love. Unloving conduct on our part is no more acceptable than unloving conduct on somebody else's part. Hence the need to forgive as we hope to be forgiven.

October 27th

James 2 v12

So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty.

The law is love and the law is liberty. It is not true that you are free if you can do just what you like, if just what you like involves harming others actively or through neglect. It is not freedom to rebel against God and to treat human beings made in His image without the respect which is due to them. It is not freedom if you choose to sin. You were made in God's image and you are only truly free, you are only truly being yourself, when you live accordingly, when you live like Jesus. The Devil and other people will tell you that freedom is the freedom to do your own thing, but actually that is slavery, slavery to sin. God's service is perfect freedom. God's Law is liberty and it is by that law that we shall be judged. Jesus has set us free from slavery to sin. We are very foolish if we give up our freedom in order to serve ourselves.

October 28th St Simon & St Jude

James 2 v13

For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment.

We can expected to be treated the way we treat other people. *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us.* How can anyone who knows the Lord's Prayer refuse to forgive another human being?

October 29th

James 2 v14

What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? Can faith save him?

Followers of Martin Luther strongly dislike this section of James. Luther himself called James an epistle of straw. Even great men can become arrogant. All Scripture is written for our learning and it is not up to us to pick and choose, rejecting those bits which we find boring, hard to understand or that we don't agree with. We have to read the whole of the Bible and prayerfully seek to understand what God is saying to us. Otherwise, it's like peeling an onion. You strip away layer after looking for the kernel containing the goodness, but there is no kernel. The goodness was in the layers you stripped away.

So what does James mean? Genuine faith must lead to a Christian lifestyle. It is no good saying you are a Christian, saying you have faith in Jesus and doing nothing about it. You look in the Word like a mirror, but instead of making the necessary alterations to your life, you carry on just as before, forgetting the likeness of Jesus, the likeness into which, as a Christian, you ought to be transformed.

October 30th

James 2 vv 15&16

If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled, notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?

It is perfectly obvious what it means to be a Christian. Our duty is simple and straightforward. As clever people, we can think of all sorts of sophisticated reasons for not helping other people. But we shouldn't be looking for reasons not to help. Our faith demands that we do care.

October 31st

James 2 v17

Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.

There are two kinds of people on this planet. There are those who belong to the Church and there are those who belong to the world. The world has rebelled against God and the consequences of that rebellion are sin and death. You can see it all around you: war and famine on the international scale; family breakdown and street crime more locally; empty lives desperately filled with the acquisition of possessions, sexual experimentation and petty politics. The world is the kingdom of darkness. Rebellion against God is sin and the wages of sin is death. God so loved the world that He sent His only Son to the end that those who believe in Him should not perish but have eternal life. Those who believe are the Church. They are no longer of the world. They have been translated from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. Their sins are washed away. They have eternal life.

You either belong to the Church or to the world. It is no use calling yourself a Christian if in fact you belong to the world.

November 1st All Saints

James 2 v18

Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works.

There is a poster with the caption, *If you were accused of being a Christian would there be enough evidence to convict you?*

James is not contradicting St Paul here. Paul's problem was people who thought they could earn their salvation. He was writing for people who either thought they were so good that God owed them or were so aware of their unworthiness that they felt they must be condemned. Martin Luther was of that latter group and that is why he found the writings of Paul so liberating. James is dealing with the opposite problem. He is concerned about complacent people who think that it is enough to say that they believe. James is saying that faith cannot possibly be genuine unless it leads to a sincere willingness to be conformed to a Christ-like life. I am quite sure Paul would have agreed with him.

November 2nd All Souls

James 2 v19

Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.

It is perfectly possible to believe every word of the Creed and still not be a Christian. I can believe that you are the best-looking, best natured woman on earth, but still not marry you. Faith is not believing that there is a God. Faith is believing in God. It is loving Him, trusting Him for your daily needs, trusting Him for what happens when you die, praying to Him daily, worshipping Him in Church, sitting down to Supper with Him, rejoicing to belong to His Church, reading the Bible (His love letters if you like), living your whole life as a Christian person. Like marriage, Baptism is a commitment. You step out in faith. You give yourself to the other. You commit your life to Him.

November 3rd

James 2 v20

But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?

Christianity is about life. We believe in the living God. Jesus came that we might have life in all its fullness. The Holy Spirit is the Giver of Life. Our faith ought to be dynamic, effervescent, life affirming, life giving.

Our detractors say that we are joyless people, condemning everything that is pleasurable and living miserable lives ourselves. Life is for living. Life is for drugs and sex and rock and roll or anyway life is for a mortgage, gym membership, clubbing, WI, flower arranging, football, etc and Church is an optional (and not very important) extra for those who find comfort in that sort of thing. Sometimes we ourselves give our detractors the evidence they need.

Faith without works is dead and the person who claims to be a Christian and is not open to the life-giving Holy Spirit is an empty person, a poor advertisement for the faith he professes. Let's be open to God and fulfil our potential as temples of the Holy Spirit!

November 4th

James 2 v21

Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac, his son, upon the altar?

The binding of Isaac is one of the most shocking stories in the Bible (Genesis 22). We cannot imagine being asked by God to sacrifice a child. We cannot imagine that God would ask us to do so. It is very tempting to say *it couldn't have happened* or *it's only Old Testament*, and put it out of our minds altogether. If we do so, we cut ourselves off from a tremendous spiritual resource which has inspired Jews and Christians for 3,000 years and helped them to come an understanding of what life is all about.

There is a tendency to rewrite the Christian story as though it were a modern fairy tale, without any pain or suffering, no deaths, no baddies. God is a nice old man in the sky. Jesus is Father Christmas for grown ups. It's His job to give us what we think we ought to have. We frighten ourselves with stories that He might not bring us any presents if we are naughty, but, really, we know that He will come down the chimney on Christmas Day. Thus we make Christianity acceptable to a modern audience and their cotton-wool wrapped children.

Only such a Christianity is useless. Life isn't cotton-wool wrapped. We (even our children) are confronted with death, suffering, and the fact that our actions have consequences. Real fairy tales (even Harry Potter) face real evil, real tests and real possibility that things will ultimately go wrong. That is why they are told and retold. They help us – adults and children – to make sense of the world. Real Christianity makes real sense of the real world and we are not doing anyone a favour if we cut out the offensive bits.

November 5th Guy Fawkes

James 2 v22

Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was made perfect?

Today is the anniversary of a terrorist plot in which religious fanatics tried to kill hundreds of people including the King and Parliament. The perpetrators were tortured and horribly executed. Terrible things do happen in the real world and tough men and women with real, honest faith are needed if evil is to be overcome.

November 6th

James 2 v23

And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God.

The point about Abraham is not that he said *I believe in God*. The point about Abraham is that he really believed in God and therefore he acted on his belief. Being an old man, he left what counted for civilisation in those days and became a nomad in a wild land. He trusted to leave that land to his descendants even though he and his wife were childless. When eventually, against all probability, they were blessed with a son, Abraham was willing to sacrifice that son to God. You could tell that Abraham had faith because he acted on it. How is your life different because you believe in God than it would be if you didn't?

November 7th

James 2 v24

Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.

This verse troubled Luther because one of his slogans was *sola fidei*, by faith alone. As we have seen, Luther needed to escape the tyranny of guilt. The Mediaeval Church had obscured Scripture, insisting that it was only read in Latin, refining scholarship to the point that only specialists could follow and threatening to try dissidents for heresy. There was a good deal of corruption even at the highest levels. Sin had become an obsession. People felt weighed down by guilt and unable to see how the burden could be lifted. Sinful man could never be acceptable to a holy God, except through works of penance. Unscrupulous people made money out of the need many people felt to make expiation for their sins. In this desperate mess, Luther read Romans and realised just how liberating the Gospel is. God is not a vengeful monster looking to send us to Hell if He can catch us out in some unrepented misdemeanour. He loves us and forgives us freely. All we need to do is to believe Him, to have faith. Luther was set free. He started shouting about this freedom, translated the Bible so that everyone could read about it and started the Protestant Reformation. We still tend to read Paul through Luther's eyes. You really need to read Ephesians 2 vv 8-10 to see what Paul is really saying. We are saved by God's grace, not by anything we can do. We receive God's grace by faith. The effect of God's grace is that we are set free to do good works.

November 8th

James v25

Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way?

You need to read Joshua 2 for the story of Rahab. The thing is that Rahab was a gentile, a woman, even a harlot and yet she acted in faith and received the reward of good works. You and I might not feel like Abraham, a super hero of the faith, revered in three major religions, known as the Friend of God. However people like Rahab are saved in the same way as people like Abraham. You and I probably don't feel much like Rahab either. But God saves people like you and me in the same way: by grace, through faith, for good works.

November 9th

James 2 v26

For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also. It is well known that the Hebrew and Greek words for spirit also mean air or breath. When a body stops breathing, it is dead. Soon after it stops breathing, it begins to decay. In Genesis we learn that man becomes a living soul when God breathes into him the spirit of life. We are different from animals because we have that breath, that soul, that spirit. Without the divine spark, we would be no more than animals.

In the same way, the living principle of faith is Christian activity. If there are no works, faith is a sham. It is dead and without works it will decay.

November 10th

James 3 v1

My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.

Some people always want to push themselves forward for leadership, to take control. Too many leaders (or would be leaders) destabilises a community. You can't get on with the task in hand for the infighting and jealousy. Leadership is a big responsibility. Leaders are responsible to the community and to God, especially church leaders. Leadership is something that we should approach humbly, accepting it because we believe it is what God is calling us to do, not something we grasp after with a sense of our own importance. Our leaders need our support and the support of our prayers.

November 11th

James 3 v2

For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.

Churchill is famous for the aphorism that *jaw jaw is better than war war*. He must be right. How often, though, words lead to sticks and stones. Today is the anniversary of the Armistice which stopped the fighting in the First World War. The war began four years previously when the Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated at Sarajevo. The reason why one event in a small town in central Europe precipitated a worldwide conflict was the web of treaties and undertakings that various nations had given one another to intervene militarily if certain events occurred. Words – some of them given in good faith, some belligerent, some deceptive, some ostensibly peaceful, many the product of mistrust – had tied Europe up in a web so that one terrorist event dragged the whole world into the bloodiest conflict it had ever seen. Words are powerful and should be used sparingly, thoughtfully and with absolute integrity.

November 12th

James 3 v3

Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us: and we turn about their whole body.

James is making the point that it does not require much to bring about a tremendous result. A bit, compared to the size of a horse, is tiny, but, through the bit, we control the horse. Our words may not seem much, but they can have huge effects – for good or ill.

November 13th

James 3 v4

Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth.

If you watch Hornblower, you know how important the helm is to a sailing ship. If the helm is shot away, not only can it not be steered, but it cannot keep at the right angle to the wind and cannot sail at all. So the helm is vitally important. So are our words, but our speech needs to be controlled by the Spirit of God, not allowed to run away with us, without thinking what harm our words might do.

November 14th

James 3 vv 5&6

Even so the tongue is a very little member, and boasteth great things.

Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and is set on fire of hell.

It makes you wonder if something had happened in James' Church to make him so concerned about the dangers of ill-considered speech. Had people's reputations been undermined by gossip? Had there been challenges to the leadership? Were cliques plotting? Was there false teaching? It certainly seems that James had personal experience of the harm words can do.

November 15th

James 3 vv 7&8

For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed and hath been tamed of mankind: But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

We often rejoice that it is so hard for dictatorships to censor words. People will talk. They will write. All the surveillance systems and spies in the world find it impossible totally to shut the dissidents up. If people are brave enough to risk the consequences of being caught, human beings can nearly always find a way of sharing their ideas. Of course, it is just as hard to prevent lies from spreading, or gossip, or malice, as it is to control ideas. Perhaps it is harder. What do they say? A lie has travelled round the world while Truth is still getting his boots on. The only place words can be absolutely controlled is at their source, in the human mind. If we are Christians, we have the mind of Christ and that should be apparent in our speech.

November 16th

James 3 v9

Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God.

It is not only a matter of speech. Deeds come into it as well. We are hypocrites if we sing God's praises yet treat human beings as if we did not know that they are made in the image of God.

November 17th

James 3 v10

Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so.

What James is saying is so obviously right. We cannot be inconsistent. We cannot be Christians part of the time. We can't sing God's praises with our lips and then use the same lips to curse or gossip or tell lies. We can't listen to the Bible with our ears and then revel in scandal. We cannot receive Holy Communion into our hands and use the same hands to beat people up or steal. We can't claim that our hearts are the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit if we are full of unloving thoughts and schemes. We ought not even to pretend. If we have faith in Jesus, we will do good works and abstain from bad ones.

November 18th

James 3 vv11&12

Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? Either a vine figs? So can no fountain yield salt water and fresh.

Strengthen for service, Lord, the hands that have taken holy things; may the ears which have heard thy word be deaf to clamour and dispute; may the tongues which have sung thy praise be free from deceit; may the eyes which have seen the tokens of thy love shine with the light of hope; and may the bodies which have been fed with thy body be refreshed with the fullness of thy life; glory be to thee for ever. Amen.

November 19th

James 3 v13

Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom. We are back where we started with wisdom. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. The wise man is the man who fears the LORD, the man who tries, by God's grace, to live according to God's Law of love. *Conversation* here means a lot more than talking. It means the whole way you conduct your life. There is a meekness, a willingness to accept that God is the source of wisdom, not our own ideas or cleverness, a willingness to be open to what God is teaching us whether through our own pondering on the sacred mysteries or through other people.

November 20th

James 3 vv 14&15

But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual and devilish.

Christians sometimes do glory in things which are not at all glorious. There are disputes and divisions in congregations or between denominations. One side thinks they are victorious and laud it over the others, while the others are bitter and resentful. The apparent victors may believe that they have won by their superior wisdom and because they are closer to God.

God's wisdom, in fact, is manifest in charity and humility. It is reluctant to quarrel and, where it is conscience bound to disagree, it remains loving, forgiving and meek. The kind of cleverness, even self-righteousness, which glories in fights and the humiliation of the opposition does not come from God.

November 21st

James 3 v16

For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work. Jesus said, By their fruits ye shall know them. Authentic Christianity is present where we see the fruits of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance. (Galatians 5 vv 22&23). Their absence in so much of the Church throughout history and throughout the world is a reproach to us all.

November 22nd

James 3 v17

But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. The Wisdom from above is Jesus. This verse could be a summing up of His character. The Church is His Body and these words describe how His Body ought to be corporately. We Christians have the mind of Christ. This is how we ought to be as individuals.

We know that between Baptism and the Second Coming, we are in the between times, when the flesh lusts against the Spirit, but surely we could incline a little more towards the Spirit and a little less towards the flesh!

November 23rd

James 3 v18

And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.

The above is enough to depress us all. We fall so far short of what we are meant to be as Christians. It is good to note how often James calls his readers *brethren*, even *beloved brethren*. He has not given up on us. For all our failings, we still belong. Surely we must long to live up to what we are supposed to be. But, even though we fail, we still belong; we are worth writing to!

Anyway, this verse is very encouraging. There are virtuous circles as well as vicious ones. If we practise what we preach, we actually get better at it. If we make peace, spread peace, the fruit of righteousness is sown in us. We cultivate virtue. The tree of life is growing. We will bear the fruits of the Spirit. If we read the Word, participate in the Sacrament, pray, share in Christian fellowship and allow all this to become engrafted in our hearts, we can and will be transformed into the likeness of Christ. We shan't be completely like Him this side of the Pearly Gates, but we shall be a lot more like Him than we are now if we allow His Spirit to do His work in our hearts.

November 24th

James 4 v1

From whence come wars and fightings among you? Come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members.

James ask a good question. Where do these quarrels come from in Christian communities. I think it was the biggest shock I got when I was first put in charge of a Church that churches can be so quarrelsome and faction ridden and that this is often at its worst among the leadership – the very people who should know better. Why should this be? I think there are two reasons, the second possibly more creditable than the former.

1. Many members of churches do not recognise how radically different we are meant to be. They treat, say, PCC as though it were the committee of a social club or the board of a commercial undertaking.
2. God matters to us more than anything and we care so passionately about matters affecting our faith that we sometimes lose a sense of proportion and fail to see the wood for the trees.

November 25th

James 4 v2

Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not.

We have certain desires. We desire certain outcomes. We don't get what we want, what we believe to be our due, what we believe to be right. So we get into conflict with the people who are opposing us or standing in our way. Instead, James says, we should ask God.

November 26th

James 4 v3

Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it on your lusts.

Why don't we get what we want when we pray for it? James says it is because we are asking for the wrong things in the wrong spirit. We are asking selfishly and selfishness is the opposite of love. Love is self-sacrificing, like Jesus, Who being in the form of God, took the form of a slave and was obedient to death. In the Garden of Gethsemane, He prayed *Thy Will be done*. That is the model prayer. Try to pray in Jesus and with Jesus. Try to pray for God's Will to be done, rather than yours or mine, because it is when God's Will is done that things become as they ought to be. It is when God's Will is done that all things work together for good.

November 27th

James 4 v4

Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.

Two verses ago James called his readers murderers. Now we are adulteries! It's a bit strong. What does he mean? I think we have to think back to the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus teaches how radically different His disciples have to be from the world. The angry man is no better than the murderer, says, Jesus; the man who lusts after a woman is the same as an adulterer.

There is another dimension. The Church is the Bride of Christ. Being baptised is like being married to Jesus. So lusting after the things of this world is a kind of adultery. As Jesus says, *You cannot serve God and Mammon. If you are not for me, you are against me.*

November 28th

James 4 vv 5&6

Do ye think that the Scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to evil? But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.

The Christian life is a life of grace, living, as we pray, in Christ and with Christ. There is a worldly spirit in us which makes the things of this world seem very attractive. Some of these things are wrong in themselves – e.g. selfishness, cruelty, dishonesty, indifference to other people's pain; some are wrong only because they get in the way of our duty to God – the perfectly innocent things we do instead of coming to Church, praying or helping someone in need. The grace God gives us is more than adequate to overcome this worldly spirit, but we have to open to Him, to co-operate with Him and not with the world.

November 29th

James 4 v7

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

We are on the winning side. We are baptised Christians. If you like, you can say that this is God's world but it is currently occupied by the forces of the Evil One. You can choose to collaborate with the occupiers or you can be loyal to the rightful King. It is up to you. If you collaborate with sin, the world and the Devil, you might have an easier life. You'll blend in. You won't be persecuted. If you go along with the Enemy, you might prosper in worldly terms. You will, however, have to live with the shame. You may find yourself going along with things that you really know are wrong. You will never be at ease with yourself. One day the rightful King will return and you will have to explain what made you a collaborator. You may not have worked for the coming of His Kingdom. You may have neglected His Church and compromised His Divine Law of Love, but, how ever things look now, the world's time is limited. To use the language of Revelation, Satan will be cast into the abyss and the kingdoms of this world will become the Kingdom of our God and His Christ and what then will happen to those who have accepted the mark of the Beast – the sign that they accept this world's values and truly belong to Mammon?

November 30th (St Andrew)

James 4 v8

Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands ye sinners; and purify your hearts ye doubleminded.

Well, here's your answer. You say you feel far from God. I'm sure there are times when God lets us go through dark times, though I'm equally sure that He is close to us even when we can neither see Him nor feel Him. Many people, however, who say they do not feel close to God aren't even trying. Do they pray? Do they read the Bible? Do they come to Church? If they do, do they do these things in the right spirit? You have to forgive what other people have done to you. You have to confess your own sins. Do you approach worship in the expectation of meeting God? If you do, you will come with a sense of awe. Or has it become routine, just something you do, part of your social life? Do you believe that prayer makes a difference? Do you try to understand how the Scripture readings relate to your life? Are you more interested in the length of the sermon than its content? Do you really believe that you receive Jesus in the Bread and Wine of Holy Communion? If you feel far from God, freshen up your worship with a dose of sincerity. If you sincerely try to do all these things and worship still means little or nothing to you, then speak to me or some other minister of religion.

December 1st

James 4 v9

Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to heaviness.

Some branches of the Christian Church used to go in for mortification of the flesh in a big way. I don't think the Church of England has ever really been one of them. There is, however, a danger of taking nothing seriously. God is a nice old man in the sky. Jesus is Father Christmas for grown ups. We live our ordinary respectable worldly lives, just like the lower middle class Englishmen most of us are and expect a Heaven of vicarage garden parties and croquet lawns. When we look at the troubles of the world: the war and famine, the family breakdown, addiction, poverty, homelessness, and compare our complacency, maybe we should be thinking more seriously about deep repentance.

December 2nd

James 4 v10

Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up. You might have bridled at my comments yesterday. After all, it isn't our fault that people take drugs, leave their wives, live in war zones or have their homes washed away by tsunamis. There is nothing terribly wrong with being lower middle class Englishmen. Why shouldn't we create a Heaven of vicarage tea parties and croquet lawns?

Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord. Try to see your life as God sees it. Accept His judgment and He will lift you up.

December 3rd

James 4 v11

Speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law: but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge.

The thing is that we are all answerable to God. Ultimately we are all answerable to Him alone. He alone is the ultimate judge. Now of course it is true that we need a court system with human judges. We also need to make more informal judgments about people. Can we trust them? Do we need to discipline them? What we do not need to do is to run people down, to condemn them. Their judge is God as He is our judge. It is not our place to judge and condemn other people. If we do so, we damage the bonds of community, we damage the person we condemn and we damage ourselves as we become self-righteous. As St Paul says, *Let everything be done in love.*

December 4th

James 4 v12

There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy: who art thou that thou judgest another?

It is God Who gives the Law, the Law of love. He judges who has transgressed that Law. He passes sentence. He freely forgives all those who truly repent. How dare we, who depend entirely on God's mercy, pass judgement on other people?

December 5th

James 4 v13

Go to now, ye that say, Today or tomorrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell and get gain.

Man proposes. God disposes. We think we are so clever. We've got it all worked out. We know what we're going to do with our lives. Some people even talk about having a life plan, the things they are going to do by the time they are 30, say. But, of course, we don't know. Anything could happen this very day which entirely changes our lives. We have two choices. We can see anything that stops us doing what we intended with our lives as a disaster, a cruel blow of fate. Or we can recognise that our lives are in the Hands of God and that He cares for us. There is no harm in having plans for the future, provided they are contingent on the prayer *Thy Will be done*.

December 6th (St Nicholas)

James 4 v14

Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.

What is more, many people's life plans are often dedicated to laying up for themselves treasure upon earth. They plan to get a good job, marry, have a nice home, bring up their children, put something away for retirement. There is nothing wrong with any of those things, but it is possible to do all those things without considering the spiritual, and, if we do, we have wasted our lives. We might not get the job, the wife, the family, the house, the pension we've worked for. Even if we do, our bodies are going to finish up as ash or worm food. In a couple of generations most of us will be forgotten and our achievements dissipated. Reality is eternal and spiritual. It is vital that we learn to relate to Reality now and stop putting the spiritual on the back burner while we get on with all the "important" worldly tasks.

December 7th

James 4 v15

For that ye ought to say, if the Lord will, we shall live, and do this or that. How many people consider God's Will when they are making plans for their lives? University, career, marriage, place where you live, pension plan? Do you consider what God wants you to do with your life? Unless you are working with Him, things just aren't going to work out.

December 8th

James 4 v16

But now ye rejoice in your boastings: all such boasting is evil.

It really makes you stop and think. Some people, reading this, will think of reasons why James does not apply to them. He was writing a long time ago in a very different world. Didn't the great Martin Luther call this an epistle of straw? This is only Jesus' brother talking, not Jesus Himself. But then Jesus Himself said: *For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul.*

If you claim to be a follower of Jesus you can't be untroubled by the thought that friendship with the world is enmity with God, especially living in the sort of materialistic society we all live in. As Christians, we have to be radically different, different for our own sakes and different for the sake of the world to which we are commissioned to bear witness. God so loved the world. It is His Will that the world should be converted from the worldly to the spiritual and we are the instruments by which He plans to achieve this. Instead of compromising with the world ourselves, we must be shining examples of lives lived *sub specie aeternitatis*, in the context of eternity.

December 9th

James 4 v17

Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.

We do know. We read the Ten Commandments and the Summary of the Law in Church. Bibles are freely available. It's your fault if you don't read them. We all have consciences. We have the Holy Spirit. We do know what is right, but what do we do with our knowledge?

December 10th

James 5 v1

Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you.

For Christians there are two problems about riches. One is the danger that being rich we shall forget our dependence on God. If we can meet our material needs and desires without reference to God, then the danger is that we shall do so. We spend Sunday morning in Tesco's buying food instead of in Church giving thanks to God for it. We aren't afraid of going hungry; so we don't feel the need to acknowledge God as the source of all good things. The other danger concerns how the riches were obtained: by violence, dishonesty or exploitation?

December 11th

James 5 v2

Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten.

You probably think at once of the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, *Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal.* James knew plenty of Christians who were taking little notice of what Jesus said. What about in the 2,000 years between James' time and ours? Do you think Christians have taken these words of Jesus seriously? Has the Church, as an institution, paid attention to what Jesus said here?

There is a remedy, if you realise that worldly wealth is ultimately unsatisfying and that its acquisition will corrupt the acquisitive as surely as it deprives the underdog. *But lay up for yourselves treasures in Heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through and steal.*

Jesus adds: *For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.* That is worth pondering.

December 12th

James 5 v3

Your gold and silver is cankered; and the rust of them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as it were fire. Ye have heaped treasure together for the last days.

Have you ever been in the embarrassing position of having the wrong ticket or card? You get to the cash machine with your library ticket. You get to the airport with your driving licence instead of your passport. You try to get into the theatre with a return rail ticket. Well people who get to the end of their lives with a bank full of money and a long list of worldly achievements have brought the wrong ticket. What they needed was faith in Jesus. Only through faith can they get into Heaven and, if they had had faith, they would have recognised that they did not need all these other things. In fact all these other things can be positively corrosive of simple faith.

December 13th

James 5 v4

Behold, the hire of the labourers who have reaped down your fields, which is of you kept back by fraud, crieth: and the cries of them which have reaped are entered into the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.

We have seen above how the acquisition of riches hurts the acquirer. The acquirer put his trust in the wrong thing and is corrupted thereby. The greed of the acquisitive hurts the poor as well. If you steal or defraud, if you don't pay fair wages and fair prices and on time, you are guilty of causing harm to Christ's poor. I don't suppose any of us does these things directly, but we may do them indirectly if we buy goods that are cheap because they are manufactured in third world sweat shops or because farmers are bullied into accepting unrealistically low prices or because materials are stripped from the land without concern for the environment. We may well want to consider how we purchase and to look at things like *Fair Trade*.

December 14th

James 5 v5

Ye have lived in pleasure on the earth, and been wanton, ye have nourished your hearts, as in a day of slaughter.

In C18 there were, in English cities, beautiful civic buildings and dwelling houses in which refined sophisticated lives were enjoyed by nice people. The money which created and sustained this lifestyle (whether those who enjoyed it knew this or not) came from the slave trade. Similarly in C19, there were many respectable houses and noble civic enterprises built on the wealth generated by the Industrial Revolution and its appalling treatment of factory hands, navvies and miners. There was also the exploitation of Empire. Most people did not question these realities. It was simply the way things were. Respectable family men and women enjoyed the profits without worrying too much about how they were generated. In fact the better off might well be charitable towards the poor and the Victorians had many philanthropic societies. Good people were blind to the realities around them. The question I always want answered is this: *Are we blind to similar realities today? Is our comfortable, decent life style based on other peoples' poverty?* It is possible to debate endlessly and inconclusively which economic systems produce the best result, but we all ought to be able to agree on what that result would be – no-one ground down by degrading poverty.

December 15th

James 5 v6

Ye have condemned and killed the just; and he doth not resist you.

It says in the Bible that rich and poor ought to be treated equally by the courts. The rich should not be able to buy favours, but neither should a rich litigant suffer injustice because the judge feels sorry for his poor opponent. There is also a great deal in the Bible about specially looking after the poor. Obviously, the poor man's need is greater. He should not be helped at the expense of injustice to the rich, but the rich ought to be generous and the powerful merciful. The poor man may need assistance because he is less able to press his claim. He may not be able to afford a lawyer. He might worry about taking a fair claim to an industrial tribunal if his employer is the only major employer and he lives in an area of high unemployment. There is also the thought that the poor man may be poor precisely because he is honest. There is a lot in the Bible to suggest that the poor are deserving of special consideration. The Victorians used to distinguish between the deserving poor and the undeserving – a dicey thing to do, looking back over those verses on judgment above. If someone needs help, he needs help, whether or not his predicament is his own fault.

December 16th

James 5 v7

Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandmen waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and the latter rain.

The early Church expected the return of the Lord Jesus. His Second Coming would not be like His First, quietly in a stable. Every eye would see Him. Heaven and Earth would pass away. All human souls – living and departed – would be judged and would go to their eternal reward or punishment. Heaven would be like a great banquet and the Sunday Eucharist not only commemorated the Crucifixion and participated in the life of the Risen Christ in the world today, but was also a foretaste of Heaven. The Second Coming was eagerly anticipated by believers. As the years went by, it became apparent that the Second Coming would not happen any time soon. God is giving time for His purposes to work out. The Second Coming remains part of our Creed, however. The world will end. Jesus will be there at the end and there will be Judgment.

December 17th

James 5 v8

Be ye also patient; stablish your hearts: for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh.

We don't know when the End will come. It could come any time or it could be in thousands of years. We don't know when we shall die. But there will be a time when God says, *Game Over*. What do you think will be your final score? If you think you need to earn a place in Heaven, you will fail. No-one is good enough, holy enough, to stand in the presence of God. Your only hope is to be in Christ. If you are in Christ you stand with Him eternally in the presence of God. If you want to be in Christ, you must repent of your sins, you must believe, you must be baptised. It is as simple as that.

December 18th

James 5 v9

Grudge not one against another, brethren, lest ye be condemned: behold the judge standeth before the door.

Surely this is one of those verses where the meaning is quite obvious. We shall soon come under the judgment of Jesus. We shall be judged according to our Christlikeness. Jesus did not bear grudges. He forgave. We cannot bear grudges in the Christian community. We cannot bear grudges in the world beyond.

December 19th

James 5 v10

Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience.

Prophets are God's spokesmen. They bring the Word of the LORD. It might be a word of comfort or of warning. It might well point out the consequences of certain actions. The prophets' message usually amounted to: Fear the LORD and no other Gods and treat other people justly and mercifully. If you don't, you will bring disaster on yourselves and your nation. If you do fear the LORD and act justly, you will be blessed. Such a message is so obviously true, but it is also extremely unpopular with people more concerned about looking after Number One than caring about God or other people. In other words such a message is likely to prove unpopular with the majority of the human race. Prophets, therefore, tend to be ignored, despised and persecuted. The biblical prophets remained faithful through rejection and persecution. They are thus models for us.

December 20th

James 5 v11

Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful and of tender mercy.

The Book of Job takes a lot of reading. There is so much of it and it is very repetitive. However, it is worth reading when you get the time. Job is a good man whom God allows Satan to test. He suffers a number of terrible calamities, but he does not give up on God. He does, however, get very depressed and very angry and challenges God for an explanation. His friends, his “comforters”, try to help him to understand. Some of what they say is helpful; quite a lot isn’t. In the end, God reveals to Job something of His infinite majesty and Job acknowledges that there are many things we will never understand and that we have to trust God. God then restores what he has lost in his trials. When everything is pressing in around you, you might feel like Job, depressed and angry. You can question. You can rail against God. But don’t let go of Him. Love Him when you hate Him and you will come through the trial a better person.

December 21st

James 5 v12

But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath, but let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay; lest ye fall into condemnation.

Judging by TV police series, one of the favourite oaths of small time villains is *On my mother’s life*. As soon as he says it, you doubt what he is going to say. If he was honest, what would be the need for the oath? If he isn’t honest, how does the oath help? Christians should always speak the truth in love. It is a matter of integrity. We don’t need oaths because we should tell the truth anyway.

December 22nd

James 5 v13

Is there any among you afflicted? Let him pray. Is any merry? Let him sing psalms.

Some people are conscious of God’s presence with them all the time. They naturally talk to God as they go about their daily lives. They ask for help when they are in trouble, guidance when they are uncertain and naturally give thanks when they are happy. I think, generally speaking, I come into this category, though it is some times easier to remember to

ask for what I want than to say thank you. Some people, on the other hand, approach God more rarely and only on more formal occasions such as the Sunday service or the daily Quiet Time. They don't bother God with relatively trivial matters. I think that actually the former is the more biblical. We ought to feel that we go through life hand in hand with Jesus and that He cares about every aspect of our existence, the apparently trivial as well as the serious and important.

December 23rd

James 5 v14

Is any sick among you ?let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.

The practice of anointing the sick with oil (unction) is biblical, but it seems to have become confined to just two branches of the Church – the charismatics and the Catholics. It is recovering ground among other Christians, however. The oil is a sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, the Spirit of Christ the Healer. It is not magic or superstition. It is a very biblical way of coming to the Lord in faith when we know our need of divine healing. If it is something you require, please ask your minister or priest.

December 24th

James 5 v15

And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him.

Sometimes our bodies and minds are healed physically. They may apparently get well of their own accord. The healing might be helped by medical intervention. I am sure that sometimes there are miracles. None of these ways of healing is to be despised. The word for “heal” is the same word in Greek as “save”. Jesus’ miracles like the healing of the paralysed man lowered from the roof, the woman with the issue of blood and the ten lepers demonstrate that there is more to healing than the physical healing of the body. There is salvation, which is to know God, which is to have eternal life. This is the healing which really matters.

December 25th (Christmas Day)

Matthew 13 v55

Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And his brethren, James, Joses, and Simon and Judas?

Jesus came from a very human family, as did we all. I'm sure that in many ways He lived an ordinary life as we would. The Holy Family would have had their times of celebration, their anxieties, their joys, their sorrows. I expect Joseph was often busy in the carpenter's shop. Mary must have been a busy housewife. They would have had friends in the village, relatives to visit in distant places. They would have taken part in things going on in the village. All this very ordinary and just like us. But the people in today's verse couldn't see beyond the ordinary. They missed the point of Jesus because they could only see a carpenter's son, their old schoolmate. The ordinary is sanctified by the presence of Jesus, but we miss the point if we cannot see beyond the ordinary to the eternal reality of the Son of God, the Word made flesh, so that we might become divine.

December 26th (St Stephen)

James 5 v16

Confess your faults to one another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.

Roman Catholics are supposed to go to Confession before they receive Communion. Some of the Protestant denominations major on confessing sins to one another. We Anglicans say a General Confession in many of our services. There is a risk that we don't treat sin seriously enough. When talking to God, we do need to be specific, to tell him specifically what is wrong in our lives. Pray for discernment so that we can recognise our faults. Pray for the grace to repent and for the grace to know that we are freely forgiven once we have repented. So we can make a new start unburdened by the past. Only so, shall we grow spiritually. You may find it helpful to confess your sins to someone else you are absolutely sure you can trust or to a minister of religion. The Church has authority to pronounce forgiveness on all who truly repent. Some people find it helpful to have a spiritual director or soul friend who helps them on their spiritual journey.

December 27th (St John)

James 5 v17

Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months.

Elias is the Greek name for Elijah. The story referred to is in 1 Kings 17-19. Elijah is a human being like we are and his prayers have a most dramatic result. He is not, however, following his own whim or trying to prove his own power. It is God Who tells him to make this prayer. The drought is Israel's punishment for its sins and a way of calling the Israelites to repentance. It is because Elijah is working with God that he is so powerful. We are powerful too when we are working with God and walking in accordance with His Will. We have the mind of Christ Who is the Power and Wisdom of God.

December 28th (Holy Innocents)

James 5 v18

And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit.

Prayers for rain are always problematic theologically. I certainly prayed for rain during last Summer's drought and we got some. People who wanted dry weather because they were working out of doors weren't too pleased. We all need rain, but it suits different people and different enterprises at different times. Moreover, do we really think God adjusts the weather for our convenience? Hasn't He set up a marvellous mechanism for making the winds blow and the rain fall in ways that can be studied by meteorological science? Is drought a punishment for sin? Could it be punishment for burning all this fossil fuel and creating the greenhouse effect? I don't know the answer to any of these questions. I just pray. Prayer is trying to align yourself with God in faith. He doesn't need me to tell Him when to make it rain, but I and all the human race need to align my will and desires with His and that surely is prayer.

December 29th

James 5 vv 19 & 20

Brethren if any of you do err from the truth and one convert him; Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins.

We do have a duty of care for one another. It does matter if people fall away and we are doing a great work if we can bring them back.

December 30th

Mark 3 v35

For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, my sister, and mother.

We have been reading the Epistle of James, the Lord's brother. James calls his readers *brethren*. Here Jesus makes it clear that His family are all those who do the will of God. This really is an astonishing thought and should make us feel incredibly privileged. We are the family of God.

December 31st

Acts 1 v14

These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren.

These are the people who have come down from the Mount of Ascension, the Mount of Olives. Having witnessed the Resurrection and the Ascension, they are awaiting the Holy Spirit so that they will be Christ's witnesses throughout the world. They will take the Good News to every creature, teach people to do everything Jesus taught them and baptise all those who believe into the Christian community, the Church, the Body of Christ. The mission is based in the fellowship and prayer of all those who know Jesus. So it is today. It is what we are doing when we meet together for prayer, attendance on the Word, sharing of our money and all our resources, Breaking the Bread; we are sustaining one another and the whole Christian community in our mission, God's mission, to the whole world. *We are the Body of Christ. In the one Spirit we were all baptised into one Body. Let us then pursue all that makes for peace and builds up our common life.*