Sunday September 5 2021 Impartiality James 2

I enjoy watching Fawlty Towers when it reappears on television. Basil Fawlty is a classic example of a person driven by a sense of desire to favour the rich and influential in society. The first episode showed him becoming so enamoured by “Lord Melbury” that he almost gave him his treasured coin collection and advanced him some cash, on another occasion he advertised “gourmet evenings” including the stipulation “no riff raff” in the advertisement, and on another occasion he began showing deference towards two guests who were doctors, until he discovered that one was a psychiatrist, which triggered a sense of suspicion and even paranoia.

The passage from the letter of James likewise features a story designed to highlight this human tendency of showing partiality particularly to the rich and influential, and ignoring, neglecting or even exploiting the poor.

There is a remarkably strong thread throughout Scripture, Old Testament and New Testament regarding the imperative that those who worship God must give priority to caring for the poor. In the era of our Scriptures they were frequently called the widow, the alien and the fatherless. The people of God were commanded to provide food for the poor, (Deut 14:28-29; 24:19-22) to pay them daily for their work,(Deut 24:14-15), and to ensure they were treated justly, (Deut 24:17-18; Jer 22:3). They were also commanded to treat all people well, they were not to defraud or slander their neighbour, not to take vengeance or bear a grudge against anyone. (Lev 19:13-18) The prophets called them to repent when they failed to care for the poor, (Isa 1:23; Jer 22:3) and in the New Testament the apostles recognised the need to prayerfully commission some of their leaders to take specific responsibility for the care of widows. (Acts 6:1)

Jesus honoured the poor by his words and actions. He spoke of the poor being blessed and of the kingdom of God belonging to them. His ministry of healing and deliverance was frequently exercised for the poor and marginalised.

James describes characteristics of the poor – chosen by God, rich in faith, heirs of the kingdom. Like Jesus he seeks to remind his readers of the reversals in God’s kingdom, that status, wealth, intelligence and power are not markers of acceptability before God. He encourages them rather to show preference and commitment to the poor. He encourages them to live out the call to love their neighbours in highly practical ways.[[1]](#footnote-1)

“Discrimination is incompatible with love, (2:1,9); so are slander and judging a neighbour (4:11); so is grumbling against a neighbour (5:9); and so is oppressing the poor (5:4)”[[2]](#footnote-2)

“James makes it clear that “the neighbour” must include all who enter our space, not only those we find attractive or even valuable to us, but above all those whom we find alien and, therefore, threatening.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Though James uses an illustration to grab their attention, there is a tone of prophetic outrage at this community which bears the noble and glorious name of Jesus by means of their professed faith in him, and yet their behaviour contradicts this allegiance.

He particularly emphasises the sin of partiality and discrimination which excludes or marginalises people based on their appearance.

The appearance of a person makes an instant and often lasting impression upon others. As followers of Jesus we are called to recognise this innate tendency and to choose how we will respond to it. We need to recognise both the tendency to ignore or reject people who are very different from ourselves and the tendency to give disproportionate attention to people who may be influential, well educated, rich, or powerful.

Rowan Williams the previous Archbishop of Canterbury is renowned for his care for the poor, through large scale public ventures and in private personal encounters. When he was a young University student he had a long conversation with a homeless man, it gave him a vastly different perspective and prompted his ongoing involvement in ventures to assist the homeless. He has said that “Christianity says every human is made in the image of God so every person you meet has a claim on your reverence, on your attention. To me, to be a Christian means that I will try to recognise that everyone is significant, and has a gift to give. This belief in the ‘image of God’ in humans means that Christians must prize justice and liberation for all people.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

This letter of James provides significant, repeated content related to treatment of the rich and poor, and responses to such treatment.

This content creates a backdrop against which James highlights how the community respond to partiality when they experience it. Regardless of its source, the emphasis of James is on how they respond verbally and in their actions. He encourages them to be mindful of their words, to ensure that they are not slanderous or dismissive, and to be careful of their actions that they are not vindictive or resentful. He calls them to love.

Application

These times provide us with an opportunity to reflect on our lives to think about our relationships. We can easily as individuals and as groups be blind to our failings. Do we give preferential treatment to some people over others?

We generally do not have much opportunity to mix with diverse people in these times of lockdown, so we may need to take time and carefully think back to effectively analyse how we relate to diverse people.

We are also called to actively care for the poor and marginalised in our society. We are called to be communities that not only welcome and include those who may be very different to ourselves, but also that we genuinely and warmly embrace and honour such people.

It is always good to take time to allow God to show us where we need to respond differently. This time gives us the opportunity for such reflection and listening to God.

*“When the poor cannot find a place in a Christian church, that church no longer has any connection to Jesus”. [[5]](#footnote-5)*

If you have access to youtube you may be interested in this link which we viewed in the Service last Sunday <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oGt8Lnhgrz8>

1. James 1:27 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Luke Timothy Johnson, “The Letter of James: Introduction, Commentary and reflections” in Leander E. Keck (et al) Ed. *The New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes,* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1998) 195 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Johnson, “The Letter of James” in Leander E. Keck (et al) Ed. *The New Interpreters Bible,* 195 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Transcript of interview with Rowan Williams for GCSE Studies accessed through <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2017-09/gcse-re-resource-lesson1.pdf> page 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Johnson, “The Letter of James” in Leander E. Keck (et al) Ed. *The New Interpreters Bible* 195 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)