

**Douglas Union with Frankfield**

# **Biblical Byways**

**Some less familiar parts of the Bible**



**A Daily Lent Course**

**Written by Archdeacon Adrian Wilkinson**

## **Lent Course 2021**

If you turn to page 338 in the Book of Common Prayer, you will find a service written specially to be used on Ash Wednesday. The preface, at the start of this service, concludes 'I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Lord to observe a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy word.' This simple pattern of daily readings and reflections is designed to help with the last part of that challenge.

This Lent Course is called 'Biblical Byways'. A byway is a less familiar or used route way, a minor road or path. When I was walking around the parish in January, I discovered some short cuts connecting different housing estates, which are not often used except by pedestrians. And so, this Lent I will take you to what are perhaps some of the less well known parts of the Bible which are interesting and fascinating in themselves. The material is deliberately short so it should only take you 5 minutes, but I hope it will sit with you for the rest of the day to encourage your own thoughts and reflections.

I have written this course with all of you in mind. We cannot gather to attend the usual mid-week and Sunday services in Lent this year. We are all missing not seeing one another. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we cannot all commit ourselves to travel through Lent together. I hope you will enjoy these daily readings and be mindful of the fact that many others in the parish will be reading the same material as you are each day. You are on your Lenten journey with them.

Adrian Wilkinson



## Day 12 – Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> February 2021

### **Collect for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent**

Almighty God,  
you show to those who are in error the light of your truth  
that they may return to the way of the righteousness:  
Grant to all those who are admitted  
into the fellowship of Christ's religion,  
that they may reject those things  
that are contrary to their profession,  
and follow all such things  
as are agreeable to the same;  
through our Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Psalm 22: 23-31.**

Praise the Lord, you that fear him;  
O seed of Jacob, glorify him;  
stand in awe of him, O seed of Israel.

For he has not despised nor abhorred the suffering of the poor;  
neither has he hidden his face from them;  
but when they cried to him he heard them.

From you comes my praise in the great congregation;  
I will perform my vows in the presence of those that fear you.

The poor shall eat and be satisfied;  
those who seek the Lord shall praise him;  
their hearts shall live for ever.

All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord,  
and all the families of the nations shall bow before him.

For the kingdom is the Lord's  
and he rules over the nations.

How can those who sleep in the earth bow down in worship,  
or those who go down to the dust kneel before him?

He has saved my life for himself;  
my descendants shall serve him;  
this shall be told of the Lord for generations to come.

They shall come and make known his salvation,  
to a people yet unborn,  
declaring that he, the Lord, has done it.

## Day 13 – Monday 1 March

### **Introduction**

Today we turn over the calendar and start a new month. In our Lent readings we now turn to the New Testament and to the Epistle of James. This letter is traditionally attributed to James, one of the brothers of Jesus, and a leader in the early Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem. If so, it may date from the early 40s AD. However, other scholars think that it was written by someone else towards the end of the first century.

Whoever wrote it, the author's prime concern is the unity and harmony of a community that is under some degree of stress. It emphasises the value of testing faith and the importance of endurance. If nothing else, this makes it topical. The writer also addresses the damage which gossip, backbiting and envy can have on a community. He also criticises those who are rich and who see themselves as superior to the poorer members of the community. In short, this short epistle is as relevant today as when it was first written. It calls us to put our faith into action and so will stimulate much thought and reflection in this season of Lent.

### **James 1:1-11**

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion:

Greetings. My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing. If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, and the rich in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. It is the same way with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away.

## Reflection

Already in the opening verse there is a clue to the intended audience of this letter. Jews historically saw themselves as a people made up of twelve tribes, but here James is talking to Christians. No doubt most of them are from a Jewish background and understand the cultural references found in the Hebrew scriptures, our Old Testament. Is he making the point that he is writing to the church which is now the new Israel scattered throughout the world?

It is no exaggeration to say that life for the past year has been very difficult for us all. It has now been almost a year since the first lockdown. It is hard to see 'joy' in the 'trials' we must endure during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the trials James addresses later in this letter are poverty and oppression; disease and premature death would have also been a fact of life in ancient culture. Note that the readers are told '*whenever* you face trials' not *if* you have to face them. Challenges in whatever form they take, can be opportunities for personal growth. When we must go through a difficult period in life, we can discover things about ourselves, and sources to draw upon which give us greater resilience. Has this been your experience of late? If so, be thankful. If not, perhaps reflect on where you might find the help you need. It may not be that far away.

In verse 5 we are reminded that God gives generously to all who ask. The next couple of verses are rather hard hitting. We would probably acknowledge that we all have our doubts at times. However, the doubt here is not doubt in yourself, but doubt in God. A doubtful mind is not completely convinced of God's unconditional love. Perhaps what also is being criticised here is double standards, saying one thing and living another. This critique is then applied to those who are rich. Throughout both the Old and New Testaments we are reminded that riches fade, and that God vindicates the oppressed and the poor in the end.

## Day 14 – Tuesday 2 March

### James 1:12-18

Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. No one, when tempted, should say, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death. Do not be deceived, my beloved.

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

### Reflection

The Beatitudes in Matthew's Gospel form a central part of Jesus' sermon on the mount. Each phrase begins with the word 'blessed'. Here we see a beatitude – 'blessed is anyone who endures temptation.' The crown of life here is like a victory wreath given to winning athletes. No wonder the person who has overcome temptation and receives it is happy or blessed.

Sadly, so often when we fall at the hurdle of temptation, we blame others or the situation in which we found ourselves. 'It's not our fault', we plead. And something small at first can snowball and grow out of all proportion until we are overwhelmed by it.

There was once a man conducting job interviews who wished to ascertain something of each applicant's character. He asked each candidate to imagine they were driving up a steep narrow road with many dangerous twists and hairpin bends. At one side was the steep rock of the hillside towering over, almost at a 90-degree angle. At the other there was no wall or barrier but rather a sharp edge to the road with a steep drop down of many, many metres. If you went over, you were gone.

Each candidate was asked how they would approach this journey. The first and second said that they would relish the challenge of this dangerous drive. They were good behind the steering wheel and would enjoy the thrill of getting as close to the edge of the road as possible so that they could see what lay below. The third candidate said that he would drive very slowly up the steep road, keeping tight in against the sharp corners and avoiding the outer edge of the road at all costs. The

third candidate was given the job. While clearly the employer wanted a risk averse employee for this post, I think you get the essential point!

## Day 15 – Wednesday 3 March

### **James 1:19-27**

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore, rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

### **Reflection**

A heading for the rest of this chapter of James might be 'True Religion'. We live in a world that is at times very strident and divided. Social media seems to thrive on the heat that disagreement produces. We have Zealots now, as there were Zealots then. They were people prepared to use violence and fear to strike out at the Roman authorities of the day. James points people in a different direction, away from violence towards unity. (I am working on this the day after the US Presidential inauguration and so it is topical!) Real faith must not be something we just carry in our heads, but also in our hearts where it determines how we live our lives. We must 'do' the word we hear and say in church.

In the ancient world, the best mirrors were made of Corinthian bronze but even still they produced a very inaccurate reflection. They were expensive and only the very wealthy could afford them. Today we can look in mirrors a hundred times a day if we choose to. Back then most people only saw their reflection occasionally in a still pool of water. It was easy to forget what you looked like. Perhaps the point here is that when we read

the law of God, we see what a true society should be and we are challenged to keep our eyes focused on that.

We will come back to the potential damage of the tongue later in this letter, but we end this chapter with reference to 'orphans and widows'. In the first century, unless a member of their family was willing to give them financial support, they would be forced into begging, selling themselves as slaves or starving. The early church seems to have been unusual in how it cared for all widows and orphans. By caring for these people, the church put God's Word into practice. When we give with no thought of receiving, we show what it means to truly serve others.

## Day 16 – Thursday 4 March

### **James 2:1-13**

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For the one who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

### **Reflection**

Today we are familiar with the concept that 'no one is above the law' and that all citizens, irrespective of their background are to be treated equally



before the courts. In more recent times too, there has been a campaign, on the part of some in society, to separate church and state.

At the time of the New Testament, the Jewish synagogues were not only places of prayer but also used as community courts. There was a time when the Church of Ireland, as the Established state church, played a large role in civic life. Indeed, even today in Ireland the churches perform certain functions on behalf of the state in the areas of marriage, education and in some aspects of the voluntary sector.

Here James is making an important point, it is never right to show favouritism to the wealthy. Jewish legal texts of the time condemn judges who make one litigant stand while another is permitted to sit. To avoid the charge of favouritism, some second-century rabbis required both litigants to dress in the same kind of clothes. James' point here is that if his readers were not impartial judges in all their dealings with people, they will in the end have to answer to the impartial judge who is God. We must ask ourselves; do we show favouritism to people who are more like us? Do we curry favour with people who have wealth or influence in the hope that we might gain influence or advantage through our friendship? Mercy and justice are the twin attributes of God and so should also be the standards we apply in all our dealings with people, whether inside or outside the church. This remains as much a challenge for us today, as it did for the audience James was writing to.

## Day 17 – Friday 5 March

### **James 2:14 – 26**

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder. Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren? Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,"

and he was called the friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.

## **Reflection**

'He is so heavenly minded he is of no earthly use!' Sometimes such a statement is made about someone who is perhaps a little innocent, naive and as a result perhaps unfocused and lazy. Behind it there might also be the assertion that to be religious is to be not fully active in the 'real world', that there is a distinction between the spiritual and the material. This section of the Epistle of James should challenge that idea. Faith must be lived out in practical action.

James gives us two examples of people of faith that anyone from a Jewish context would have recognised immediately. Abraham left his homeland with his wife, family, livestock and possession and travelled to Canaan when requested to do so by God. His faith was tested severely when he was asked to offer his only son Isaac as a sacrifice. The other example of faith is Rehab the prostitute.

Rahab's story is told in the book of Joshua. She was a prostitute in Jericho. The spies, who Joshua sent to spy out the land and the city, stay with her. The king of Jericho mounts a search for them, having heard the spies are with her. She hides them, throws the Jericho authorities off their trail and gives them good advice on how to escape, at the same time striking a deal with them by which she and her father's family can have their lives saved when the Israelites attack and take the city. The spies insist that anyone staying in her house during the attack will be protected, and this will be indicated by a red sash that she will hang in the window.

The essential point we need to take from our passage today is that our faith must be reflected in the way we live and the priorities we have for transforming this world and our communities into what God would like them to be. Also, it is worth noting that faith can sometimes be found in the most unlikely of people and in the most unusual of situations. Look out for examples of people putting their faith in action where you are today.

## Day 18 – Saturday 6 March

### James 3:1-12

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

### Reflection

An often-quoted popular proverb is that we have been 'given two ears and one tongue for a reason'. We should listen to others twice as much as we speak ourselves. I wish I could learn to put that into practice!

In chapter three, James provides us with some helpful and practical advice on the power and place of free speech. He uses some very pertinent metaphors that do not rely on any wisdom or education. He is speaking plainly to everyone. Controlling horses with bits and ships with rudders were common illustrations in the ancient Mediterranean and would have been understood by everyone. So also is the image of the smallest of flames, which given the right (or should I say wrong) conditions can become a raging forest fire that destroys thousands and thousands of acres of forest.

Perhaps the challenge for us today is even greater than it was for the generation of Christians who were hearing the words of this letter being read to them for the first time. We have so many ways to communicate

today which keep the person being addressed or spoken about at a distance. Coupled with that is the speed of communication. If we had to look someone in the eye as we addressed them, we might be more judicious in our use of words. If we had to sit overnight before we posted that letter, we might tear it up and start again, or even not send it at all. Yet today we send texts or emails, comment using a variety of social media platforms or speak hastily on Zoom while thinking that our microphone is on mute and this happens all in an instant.

These messages and words can be seen and heard by someone on the other side of the world in a matter of seconds and remain there for ever. Once the words are sent, they can never be taken back. The power of words should never be underestimated. They can encourage and inspire, or denigrate and destroy. James concludes here by using other common examples of impossible incongruity. Figs, olives and grapes were the three most common agricultural products of the Judean hills. Is our conversation always wholesome and fruitful? Perhaps there are times when we need to be open to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives to help purify our thoughts and speech. No doubt the common sense proverb at the start of this reflection is worth keeping in mind too.