

**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 19 – Sunday 7 March

### Collect for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent

Merciful Lord,  
Grant your people grace to withstand the temptations  
of the world, the flesh and the devil  
and with pure hearts and minds to follow you, the only God;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

### Psalm 19

The heavens are telling the glory of God  
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

One day pours out its song to another  
and one night unfolds knowledge to another.

They have neither speech nor language  
and their voices are not heard,

Yet their sound has gone out into all lands  
and their words to the ends of the world.

In them has he set a tabernacle for the sun,  
that comes forth as a bridegroom out of his chamber  
and rejoices as a champion to run his course.

It goes forth from the end of the heavens  
and runs to the very end again,  
and there is nothing hidden from its heat.

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul;  
the testimony of the Lord is sure  
and gives wisdom to the simple.

The statutes of the Lord are right and rejoice the heart;  
the commandment of the Lord is pure  
and gives light to the eyes.

The fear of the Lord is clean and endures for ever;  
the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

More to be desired are they than gold,  
more than much fine gold,  
sweeter also than honey, dripping from the honeycomb.

By them also is your servant taught  
and in keeping them there is great reward.

Who can tell how often they offend?  
O cleanse me from my secret faults!

Keep your servant also from presumptuous sins  
lest they get dominion over me;  
so shall I be undefiled, and innocent of treat offence.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
be acceptable in your sight,  
O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

## Day 20 – Monday 8 March

### **James 3:13-18**

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

### **Reflection**

We live in an age of impatience. We often want to take the short cut to achieve our objectives. Bitter jealousy and selfish ambition are sometimes the result of being drawn into wrong desires by the pressures of society. 'Assert yourself', 'Go for it', 'You are better than anyone else' can be well meaning advice, but sometimes we can be drawn into greed and destructive competitiveness which trample over others. They cause chaos and hurt. While ambition and drive are good things, they should not come at any cost.

Perhaps one of the few positive things to come out of the current pandemic and the incessant lockdowns, is the need to slow down and to reassess our priorities. Some things which appeared ever so urgent and important this time last year, are now seen in a whole new light.

In these verses today, James turns to the theme of wisdom. It is not something we can teach, or do a crash course in to obtain. It is something gathered slowly, over time and with patience. But the fruits of wisdom are obvious. Seeking God's wisdom delivers us from the need to compare ourselves to others and to want what they have. God knows what can make us truly happy and fulfilled. As a result, we have peace of mind and peace is at the heart of all our relationships.

## Day 21 – Tuesday 9 March

### **James 4:1-12**

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, "God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? But he gives all the more grace; therefore it says,

"God opposes the proud,  
but gives grace to the humble."

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbour?

### **Reflection**

We can have the rather romantic and sentimental view that in the early Church there were no problems, and that as the first generations of

Christians lived so near the time of Christ, it was easier for them to have faith. This section of the Epistle of James should disabuse us of that view.

In the New Testament, sometimes rhetorical exaggeration or hyperbole is used for dramatic effect. We assume that James's readers have not literally killed anyone, but they are exposed to teachers who regard murder as a satisfactory means of attaining justice and the redistribution of wealth. This was a sensitive issue in a country then occupied by a foreign power, namely the Romans.

There is nothing wrong with wanting a pleasurable life. God gives us good gifts that he wants us to enjoy. But having friendship with the world involves seeking pleasure often at the expense of others. We might squander the scarce resources of this planet that could be distributed more fairly with others.

Jesus summarised the law as love for God and neighbour (Matthew 22:37-40). When we fail to love, we are breaking God's law. It is good to examine ourselves and ask, are we building people up or tearing them down? Saying something positive to others cures us of finding fault and increases our ability to obey God's law of love.

## Day 22 – Wednesday 10 March

### **James 4:13-17**

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money." Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.

### **Reflection**

Having counselled the oppressed in the previous passage, James now turns his attention to the oppressors, denouncing their self-satisfied forgetfulness of God. Most of the wealth in the Roman Empire was accumulated by either the landed gentry from land-based revenues such as rent from tenant farmers and their crops, or by the merchant class through trade.

While we all must plan for the future, and you can't run a profitable and successful business without making reasonable projections, working hard

and with drive and ambition; we should never allow any enterprise to take over our lives to such an extent that we forget deeper values and goals. Jesus once asked the question, 'What does it profit a man to gain with world but lose his soul?' Nothing lasts for ever.

The point James is making here is obvious. It is good to make plans, but they might disappoint us if we leave God out of them. What would you like to be doing 10 years from now? One year from now? Tomorrow? Plan ahead but ask for God's guidance.

## Day 23 – Thursday 11 March

### **James 5:1-6**

Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you.

### **Reflection**

Here again James comes back to the theme of judgement on the wealthy who oppress others. Throughout most of the rural areas of the Roman Empire, including much of rural Galilee, rich landowners profited from the toil of the serfs (often alongside slaves) who worked their massive estates. That feudalism arose only in medieval times is a misconception; it is simply less prominent in the literature of the Roman times because it concentrated on life in the cities, although possibly only 10% of the Empire was urban.

James' denunciation here has much in common with some of the Old Testament prophets. Like them, he appeals to God's judgement rather than to human retribution and revolution. Verses 2 and 3 here echo the advice of Jesus in Matthew 6:20 about having 'treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.'

In Jewish law, withholding wages, even for a day was condemned. At a time when the poorest lived hand to mouth, they needed their daily

wages to put some food on the table or else they would go to bed hungry. Here the unequal balance of power is being condemned. The rich live in luxury and if they delay paying what is rightly due to others, they are reminded that God is watching!

The final verse in this section is probably a reference to the fact that poor people who could not afford to pay their debts were thrown into prison or else forced to sell their possessions and even family members into slavery. Such people often died of starvation or disease because of their poverty. God counts this as murder if those with power and wealth do nothing to help but only add to their burdens.

## Day 24 – Friday 12 March

### **James 5:7-12**

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your "Yes" be yes and your "No" be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.

### **Reflection**

Endurance is all something we have had to get used to. This time last year, Covid-19 was beginning to spread at a concerning rate across the country. Plans for St Patrick's weekend were being shelved everywhere and we were expecting an announcement that schools were going to close immanently. We expected a few weeks or months of disruption and inconvenience, but the summer was approaching and despite the fact that there was no vaccine in sight, many people felt that life would be back to some normality by the autumn.

We can look back at our naive optimism now with a rueful smile. We have all had to endure a long and very tough year, but there is hope and a



brighter horizon in the distance. However, we all still must be patient, cautious and endure for the present.

While the context of the early Jewish Christians here is quite different from ours today, we can still have some sympathy with them. The issue for the early Church was the timing of the second coming of Jesus when all would be made right again and the economic and social injustices would be corrected. They expected it imminently, within their lifetime. However, it was not to be so.

The last verse in this section seems to have been slipped in as an extra bit of advice. Maybe it is a warning against making rash promises in a revolutionary environment. Consistency, honesty and integrity are what matters. One should pray rather than swear because the fullest form of an oath included a self-curse, which was like saying 'may God kill me if I fail to do this' or in the simpler preadolescent idiom 'cross my heart and hope to die.' Wouldn't life be better if we all adopted that simple rule, 'let your yes be yes and your no be no'.

## Day 25 – Saturday 13 March

### James 5:13-20

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

### Reflection

Today we end our journey through the epistle of James. I hope you have enjoyed its practical, no nonsense wisdom.

In these last verses, it is almost as if time is running out, or space is running short, and so James tries to pack in a number of important points before he finishes. He mentions prayer and praise, as well as the healing of both body and relationships. Here again there is so much that could be said about these few last verses.

In scripture, oil was both medicine (think of the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:30-37) and a symbol of the Spirit of God used in the anointing of kings (see 1 Samuel 16:1-13). Thus, oil can represent both the medical and spiritual spheres of life. We should not separate the physical and the spiritual as Jesus is Lord over both the body and the spirit.

People in church are not alone. Members of Christ's body should be able to count on others for support and prayer, especially when they are sick and suffering. We are fortunate to have a parish prayer chain dedicated to that purpose. The 'prayer of faith' does not refer to the prayer of the sick person but to the faith of the people praying. God heals through the medical profession and through the emotional and spiritual support of others when we are at our weakest. Ultimately, we are all in the hands of God, but often prayer is part of God's healing process.

James ends his epistle almost abruptly. It is almost as if the final page signing off has been lost. However, he ends on the important theme of relationships, both with God, with others and within ourselves.

## **Conclusion**

The Epistle of James emphasises faith in action. Right living is the evidence and result of faith. The church must serve with compassion, speak truthfully, live in obedience to God and love one another. The body of believers ought to be an example of heaven on earth, indeed a foretaste of heaven drawing people to Christ through love for God and each other.