**James 2:1-10, (11-13), 14-17**

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).

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.

James wasn’t telling the church to be good to the poor to earn salvation. He was saying that if their faith was genuine, they’d actually be loving their neighbours as themselves. Faith is more than affirming theological formulas, but calls for a thorough reorientation of one’s life. Faith makes a difference in us. More importantly (in these verses), faith makes a difference in our relations with our sisters and brothers: just as God has chosen needy, broken, bereft brothers and sisters as the visible embodiment of Jesus’ good news among us, so faith reorders our own desires away from securing our well-being by our own efforts, from enhancing our image by associating with glittering celebrities, and summons us to make our friends among the shabby poor, and to trust the provision of God who gives freely to all. *A.K.M.Adam.*

**Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23**

1. A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favour is better than silver or gold. 2. The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all. 8. Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail. 9. Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor. 22. Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; 23. for the Lord pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them.

v.1 - If the choice is between wealth or a good reputation, the way of wisdom is to choose a good name. v.2 - there is a common humanity between the rich and the poor, because ‘the Lord is the maker of them all.’ It invites humility in the wealthy, who might otherwise (in the thinking of the day) have felt themselves to be especially blessed by God and more worthy than the poor. V. 8 warns, ‘whoever sows injustice will reap calamity….’ The Hebrew Bible understanding of retributive justice sees calamity not so much as God’s direct punishment of wrongdoing as a basic pattern woven into creation. If people practice oppression, in the end, events will turn around to bring their hurt back upon them. Indeed, social inequality and deprivation can fuel unrest and even terrorism in our time. The second part of the verse says, ‘the rod of anger will fail’ implies that the purposes of angry action will not be met, as anger turns back against itself. Verses 22 & 23 come from another collection of wisdom sayings, and sound a note that is unusually socially progressive for wisdom literature, which has been criticized for generally supporting the status quo. V.22 enjoins against robbing the poor ‘because they are poor’ - they are vulnerable and lack the power to defend themselves. The second half of the verse repeats in parallel structure, varying slightly: ‘or crush the afflicted at the gate,’ Here, the vulnerable one is pictured as afflicted, perhaps maimed, and sitting at the gate of the city, in public view. Verse 23 gives the reason for not robbing the poor, ‘for the Lord pleads their cause….’ God is an advocate, someone to put his case before a heavenly tribunal. There is a more pressing reason for people not to rob the poor, because God ‘despoils of life those who despoil them.’ Here, God takes a more direct role in retribution against the unjust, despoiling or robbing them of life, even as they had robbed the poor of their life’s blood. Again, this verse sounds a note in resonance with prophetic messages of justice and impending judgement on those who oppress the downtrodden. *Howard Wallace*

**Mark 7:24-37**

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

If Jesus had just abolished one of the barriers between Jews and Gentiles in God’s kingdom (‘washing hands’ in last week’s reading), why would he then hold fast to this division by rejecting the woman’s request for healing? His statement only makes sense if it is uttered, not as his own view, but as the faulty view of his opposition. If this is true, then Jesus’ initial rejection is meant to make the reader pause and ask, ‘Why would he say that?’ The answer is derived from the narrative context: he wouldn’t! The idea that Jesus is playing devil’s advocate by first presenting the (faulty) position of his adversaries makes sense of Jesus’ uncharacteristic change of mind in the story. It provides the opportunity for Jesus to attack the stance of the religious authorities once more, albeit in a more subtle fashion. Jesus’ role as devil’s advocate allows the woman to utter the very truth to which he holds, and which is modelled in his own ministry and in the later mission of the church. Instead of reflecting his own views, it highlights the extreme difference between his perspective and that of the religious authorities on this matter. By playing the part of the religious authorities, Jesus actually highlights the absurdity of exclusion based on superficial issues such as ethnicity and gender.

It is also important to recognise the unlikely strength of this woman. She manages to find Jesus when he would rather be in seclusion. She approaches him, knowing he is a Jew, and may not be inclined to grant her request. When she is refused she funnels her determination into ‘reasoning’ with him, a significant trait for a woman in that culture. In a world based on hierarchy, women were thought to possess less-developed reasoning than men.

*Holly J Carey*

**Psalm 125**

Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people, from this time on and forevermore.

For the sceptre of wickedness shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous, so that the righteous might not stretch out their hands to do wrong. Do good, O Lord, to those who are good, and to those who are upright in their hearts. But those who turn aside to their own crooked ways the Lord will lead away with evildoers. Peace be upon Israel!

Psalm 125, a psalm of trust, compares God’s care for the people to the hills that surround Mt. Zion or Jerusalem (v. 2) or even to Zion itself (v. 1). These hills are not especially large, so the language here depends on mythic perceptions. These hills which constitute and surround the place where God dwells amongst his people are symbols of the embracing protection of the Lord or of the trust of one who is faithful. The Lord will not let wickedness come upon the people so that they may not be tempted to follow suit (v. 3). The psalm then ends with a brief prayer for divine justice for those who are good and for peace upon Israel. These verses sound like proverbs themselves only they have been turned into prayers directed toward God. While the psalm ends with its indirect injunction for the people to do good and not follow ‘crooked ways’, it begins with what lies at its heart, namely a proclamation that the security of the people lies in the Lord’s protection and that faith is the key response to that. *Howard Wallace.*