

## Sermon for Riddells Creek and Mount Macedon

6 September 2009

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

**James 2:1-10, 14-17**

**Mark 7:27-34**

“Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”<sup>1</sup>

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O LORD, our rock and our redeemer.<sup>2</sup> Amen.

I was less than ecstatic this week when I collected my car from Gisborne Crash Repairs. Not about the repairs to the car – I’m *very* excited about my new dent-free passenger side. My lack of ecstasy was because of the excess on my insurance that I had to pay. I got on the internet and complained to my friends that I was feeling skint. And I got back sympathetic messages from around the world – there was much agreement that it was *horrible* for me to have to pay the money that the RACV didn’t cover.

Then I read the Bible passages for today – and had a metaphorical bucket of cold water dumped over me. Because today’s Bible readings talk about the poor, the *really* poor: those who don’t have the security of knowing they will be able to eat three times a day seven days a week; those whose families can be completely wiped out if the breadwinner has a simple illness. From both the Old and New Testaments the message comes: God cares for the poor; God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith; God blesses those rich who share what they have with the poor.

None of this is a surprise to those who follow Jesus. The gospels are rife with examples of Jesus’ care for the poor and for those whom society considered outsiders. When Jesus began his public ministry by preaching at Nazareth he took as his text a passage from Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor”.<sup>3</sup> Throughout his ministry Jesus associated with the poor and with society’s outcasts, and was criticised for it. In the beatitudes Jesus completely overturned the values of the world and indicated that the poor and excluded were particularly blessed by God. In the parable of the great judgment in the Gospel of Matthew we are shown that following Jesus involves caring for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison, because in caring for the least of these, we care for Christ himself.

It’s because we have this example of Christ’s to follow that Christians are different from other people, with different values. For example, while the world differentiates between rich and poor; we know that rich and poor alike are created by God. While the world condemns the poor for being poor, and praises the rich for being rich; we know that God has chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith, and

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<sup>1</sup> James 2:17.

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 19:14.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 4:16.

that it's better to have a good name than great riches. Other people can know whether or not someone is Christian by their attitudes to the poor and the rich, by their care for one and their lack of flattery for the other. Or that, at least, is the theory.

In practice, our attitudes to the rich and the poor of this world are often not all that different from the attitudes of the rest of society. Our society places enormous importance on appearance, and on praising and rewarding the rich, while ignoring the poor or blaming them for their poverty. It's no wonder that we in the church can get sucked into this as well. As today's passage from the Letter of James shows, this has been a problem since the church was first born. The church that James was writing to had also given into the temptation to identify with wealth and status at the expense of the poor whom Jesus loved and with whom Jesus identified. James was horrified.

When James describes the arrival of the rich person and the poor person into the assembly, and their different treatment by the community, he is probably describing something he has seen happening. James refers to Jesus' beatitude, "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven", in arguing that God has chosen the poor to be heirs of the kingdom. In accusing his readers of dishonouring the poor, James reverses the code that was the foundation for the Greco-Roman world, in which honour was to be given to the rich and powerful. In the church, James argues, honour is to be given to both rich and poor, neither is to be honoured at the expense of the other, neither is to be dishonoured. Favouritism, James argues, is a sin, not to be committed by those who believe in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ.

Today's reading from James condemns two situations, and the second is thinking that faith can be real without leading to deeds. James is not arguing that works without faith is sufficient; he's arguing that if belief in Jesus does not lead to action in the world, then it is not actually faith. Just as favouritism is contrary to the example of Christ, so spiritual words without physical deeds are contrary to the example of Christ who fed both the spiritually and the physically hungry and healed both the spiritually and the physically sick.

James, in reproaching his readers asks them whether they really believe in "our glorious Lord Jesus Christ". James knows what the Scriptures show us, too; Jesus' great love of and identification with the poor and the needy. In that love, Jesus was drawing on parts of his own faith tradition like today's reading from Proverbs, that declared that God had not only made rich and poor alike; God also acted as advocate for the poor, and blessed those who shared bread with them.<sup>4</sup>

This is an interesting message to come from the Bible's Wisdom literature. Quite often Wisdom literature, especially the book of Proverbs, talks about the good being rewarded and the bad being punished. One of the themes of the Wisdom literature is that wealth is a sign of God's blessing, and so it follows that poverty is a sign of God turning away. The trouble with this consoling message is that so

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<sup>4</sup> Proverbs 22:9, 23.

often it just isn't true. So the wisdom literature also included books like Job, which shows a righteous man being tormented through absolutely no fault of his own, and Job's friends being completely wrong when they told Job that he must have done *something*, so he'd better repent quickly. And we have passages like today's from the Book of Proverbs. This is the tradition that Jesus drew on in his own life, following the example of his Father.

James demands that Christians follow the ethical direction of Jesus' life, the way Jesus cared for people. He challenges his first readers, and us, to be involved in justice in the same way that Jesus was, including by caring for the poor.

Poverty is as great an issue for us today as it was for the church to which James wrote. James' readers looked at a brother or sister and saw that they were naked and in need of food. We look at the people of the world and see those needs on a worldwide scale. According to the United Nations there were about 1.4 billion people living in poverty in the world in 2005, which was down from 1.8 billion people in 1990. By 2015, which is when the UN Millennium Development goals are due to be met, the number will hopefully be down again, to a mere one billion. One billion people living on less than \$1.50 a day.

James was appalled that a Christian could tell a brother or sister who was naked and lacking daily food, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill", without doing anything to care for them. I suspect that he would be equally appalled at seeing Christians who know about the extreme poverty current in our world, and don't whatever we can, no matter how little that may be, to work to end it. The royal law, the law given by God, is that we should love our neighbours as ourselves. This is how we show our love for God, by caring for all those whom God has created. May God be with us as we seek to follow the example of His Son, living as those who believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.