**2nd September 2012**

**The Letter of James: Chapter One**

One fine day four people were flying in a small four passenger plane: a pilot, a minister and two teenagers, one of whom had just won an award for being ‘the smartest teenager in the world’.

As they were flying along, the pilot turned to the three passengers and said ‘I’ve got some bad news and I’ve got some worse news. The bad news is, we’re out of fuel. The plane’s going down and we’re going to crash. The worse news is I only have three parachutes.

This meant of course that someone would have to go down with the plane.

The pilot continued, ‘I have a wife and two kids to support. I have many responsibilities. I’m sorry but I will have to take one of the parachutes. With that he grabbed one of the parachutes and jumped out.

The Smartest Teenager in the World said ‘I may find the cure for cancer or AIDS, I may solve the world’s economic problems. Everyone is counting on me!’ With that he grabbed the second parachute and jumped out.

That left the minister and the other teenager. The minister said to him ‘Son, you take the last parachute. I am at peace with God. I’m not afraid to die. I believe there is more to life than death. Now take the last parachute and go’

‘Relax Reverend’ said the teenager. ‘The Smartest Teenager in the world has just jumped out with my rucksack!’

A lot of people think they are pretty smart. In reality they are a lot like the Smartest Teenager in the World. They jump into the world without parachutes. They think they know it all and have all they need to live happy and fulfilled lives to keep them from crashing and burning. What they actually have is a rucksack.

What will save you in the difficult times, the times of trial and testing? What will give you strength? What will help you live?

There is no guarantee that we will not face difficulties and struggles in our lives and in our faith. The author of the letter of James is keenly aware that experiences of suffering can provoke crises of faith. How can we respond to them wisely?

The focus for our sermons over the next five weeks is the letter of James. A brief word now about the background to this letter. There is much debate about who wrote it and when. The most likely author is James the brother of Jesus, who led the Jewish Christian church in Jerusalem up to around 60AD.. It primarily deals with the social and practical implications of having a Christian faith and communicates with people who are undergoing the testing of their faith through trials and temptations. There is much in the letter as we will discover over this month that is relevant to our modern life. Let’s start to look at it.

James starts by making it clear that bad things happen to good people and Christianity does not shelter one from the difficulties and tragedies of life. Thus the first thing he holds before us is a perspective with which to face difficulties and tragedies of human life.

‘My friends, whenever you have to face all sorts of trials, count yourselves supremely happy in the knowledge that such testing of your faith makes for strength to endure!’ (1v2)

What exactly is James advising? Is he promoting a martyr complex? Are we Christians actually to take pleasure in suffering?

James uses a lot of hyperbole, or exaggerated language to grab our attention and make us think. It was a technique that Jesus used. The joy or happiness of which James speaks results from the growth those trials can bring. In the midst of them, we can be drawn closer to God, experience God’s sustaining power, the love of family, friends and the community of faith. James rejoices not in trials themselves but in the steadfastness of faith and integrity of character that result from experiences of suffering. Indeed, James says not a word about why we face trials or from where they come. The focus instead is on where they may lead.

I was moved to hear the story of Martine Wright a member of the British Paralympian team. Just 24 hours after London won the bid to host the 2012 Games four bombs ripped through London killing 52 people and injuring hundreds. Martine Wright lost her legs in the 7/7 bombings. She had been on the tube on her way to work. She is philosophical about what happened to her. She is competing in the women’s sitting volleyball team. She said ‘maybe it’s something I was always meant o do. I was unlucky to get on the Tube that day but I was lucky to survive. She wants to inspire others to ‘show them it might be the most traumatic thing in your life but there are good things you can get out of it. If you can get through something like that, you can get through anything.

Endurance, however, is not the final result of trial: ‘Let endurance perfect its work in you that you may become perfected, sound throughout, lacking in nothing.’ Here at the beginning of James letter is a central theme and primary goal: the wholeness and integrity of Christian life. Trails can serve this end, for Christian life matures as the difficulties and tragedies of life are encountered, as faith flexes its muscles under pressure. This is why trials can be considered as joy – not because they are joyous in and of themselves but because endurance of them yields integrity and wholeness of Christian character.

Names are assigned to us, based on our outward circumstances by ourselves and other people. It has been a topic of discussion around the Paralympics – the labels we can put on disabled people. We may all have been the victims of labelling: "Sinner, Failure, Stupid, Dummy, Unclean" all are names which label us. But what we are called, either by others or by ourselves does not determine who we are. It might speak of those external circumstances, but it might be wholly inaccurate. You see, a failure is not someone who fails. In reality, the people who fail the most are the ones who succeed. You only get to success by taking risks and risk-taking brings many failures along the way. A failure is someone who simply doesn't try. No, names do not determine who you are. You are who you are on the inside.

So, the first important lesson is that we must cultivate the inner person. The inner person is the person who counts.

It boils down to relationship. We are only as strong as our personal relationship with Christ.

Divine wisdom may be needed to embrace this perspective on trials and persevere in the midst of them. It is available if you ask for it and believe God is at work in the world bringing good out of even the trials and sufferings of life.

James then makes reference to poverty and riches. Economic hardship may have been among the chief trials with which his readers struggled. A further dimension of trials is developed in the form of the temptations of life verse 12-15. James says there is nobody to blame except ourselves. Our desires can drag us away from what we know is good for us. Every good thing comes from God with whom there is no variation – great is thy faithfulness – there is no shadow of turning in thee.

The last section of chapter one has James outlining some aspects that will make your faith real and vital.

Frederick Beuchner, an American theologian observes that many people think of religion as a good thing, ‘like social security and regular exercise’ but not something to go overboard about. Don’t get too serious about it. Due to religiously motivated violence many today are viewing religion as dangerous. To James’ way of thinking, religion is not a casual matter. It calls for serious commitment, both in terms of careful ‘hearing’ and faithful doing which transform lives and the life of the world for the better – in a loving way.

In this last section of chapter one we are challenged to faithful doing.

In verse 19 he has a three fold appeal: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to be angry. Like the old saying – God gave you two ears but just one mouth for a good reason.

James values listening, temperate speech, and humility in all areas of life. Discard everything sordid and every wicked excess, and meekly accept the message planted in your hearts, with its power to save you.

That message is none other than the gospel, which is God’s word to us of mercy, power and renewal in Jesus Christ. One of our primary and ongoing tasks as Christians is to attend to that word as it comes to us in preaching, in the sacraments, in teaching, in tradition, and in careful study of the scriptures. It is an urgent task and where Christians are thus engaged they will be slow to speak. They must listen carefully and patiently to God before they presume to speak and act in God’s name.

Moreover James urges Christians to rid themselves of anything that hinders reception of God’s word, for just as the sower in Jesus parable faithfully sows the word, so has the word, through the preaching and teaching of many faithful witnesses, been implanted in our lives. It is James’s hope that we will come to the word with openness, and through careful attention to it nurture its growth in our lives.

In James’ view the careful hearing of the word leads to the doing of it, for receptive hearing involves commitment and obedience to what has been heard. It is important to note that James does not contrast hearer and doers, but rather compares two kinds of hearers: those who act upon what they have heard and those who do not.

To make this point, James draws on a striking, though puzzling, illustration. Those who are hearers of the word, but not doers, are compared to those who look in a mirror but then promptly forget what they look like. Perhaps James point is that they look in the mirror and see that changes in their appearance are called for, but they fail to make the necessary alterations – they step away with hair still unkempt and clothes askew. Or perhaps he thinks that they look in the mirror and see grace and forgiveness reflected there, but the impression is only fleeting, and they step away from the newness of life that has been brought by the word. Whichever the case, hearing that does not lead to doing is worthless.

Cosmetics magnate Estee Lauder insists that a good mirror is the most important accessory in a woman’s life’. She’s right, but for reasons other than she supposes! All of us –women and men – need a good mirror that will help us see ourselves as we really are. In many ways it’s a good definition of a true friend – some one who can hold up a mirror to you and tell you what you are really like.

James reminds us that there is only one mirror that shows forth our true reflection: the gospel of Jesus Christ. In that mirror, which James holds before us, we see who we are in the light of God’s love and what we are meant to be.

In James view genuinely religious persons are doers of the word, and not hearers only’.

The Pharisees were criticised by Jesus as only doing lip service to their faith. They criticised his disciples for not washing their hands before a ceremonial meal. But Jesus recognizes their hypocrisy and he quotes from Isaiah, "These people honour me with their lips but their hearts are far from me."

According to the story, Queen Victoria was once at a diplomatic reception in London. The guest of honour was an African chieftain. All went well during the meal until, at the end, finger bowls were served. The guest of honour had never seen a British finger bowl, and no one had thought to brief him beforehand about its purpose. So he took the finger bowl in his two hands, lifted it to his mouth, and drank its contents--down to the very last drop!

For an instant there was breathless silence among the British upper crust and then they began to whisper to one another.

All that stopped in the next instant as the Queen, Victoria, silently took her finger bowl in her two hands, lifted it, and drank its contents! A moment later 500 surprised British ladies and gentlemen simultaneously drank the contents of their own fingerbowls.

It was "against the rules" to drink from a fingerbowl, but on that particular evening Victoria changed the rules---because she was, after all, the Queen.

But of what does authentic religious activity consist? First, right hearing of God’s word is never without effect on our speaking – on what we say and how we speak to another. Right hearing empowers us for self control and, in James’s view, nowhere is self control more urgently needed than in our speaking.

Second, genuine religion consists of caring ‘for orphans and widows in trouble. James stands squarely in the tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures, in which orphans and widows are frequently lifted up as representative of the oppressed and as a special focus of God’s concern. For James they are representative of all who find themselves defenceless and suffering poverty, distress and oppression. Genuine religion is marked by care and concern for people in need.

Finally genuine religion consists of keeping oneself untarnished by the world. James is not advising that Christians are to refrain from involvement in the world. He has just encouraged Christians to take a full part in the affairs of the world, to those in need. What he is saying is that a Christina must not embrace the world’s standards. He uses the word ‘world’ to refer to ways of thinking and systems of values that do not take God’s existence and God’s claims into account. Christians are to be engaged in the world, but they are to hold to a different understanding of reality and a different set of values, informed by their experience of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. We follow Christ – not what we read in the glossy magazines or see on the T.V. or whoever else tries to shape our values and opinions. We follow Christ.

Religion is therefore a lot more than doctrine or rituals, although it includes these. In the final analysis, for James at the least – the test of genuine religion is not orthodoxy (right belief) but orthopraxy (right practice).

There is a legend that the queen of Sheba came to visit Solomon, and one day she put him to the test. She brought artificial flowers so perfectly formed that no human eye could detect them from real flowers. She put them in a vase on Solomon’s table, in his throne room next to his flowers. As he came in, the queen of Sheba is reported to have said, "Solomon, you are the wisest man in the world. Tell me without touching these flowers, which are real and which are artificial." It is said that Solomon studied the flowers for a long time and spoke nothing, until finally he said, "Open the windows and let the bees come in."

There are ways to tell the artificial from the real—let the bees come in; they will know where the real is. If we live with the authentic Jesus long enough, we will recognize the artificial when we see it.

Over the next few weeks we will see the themes of James expanded on. In our lives we see faith tried and tested so that we become mature and authentic in Christ.