**8th September 2024**

**Call to worship**

Look around you!
Everybody is unique and different (pause).
Let us celebrate together,
each one bringing gifts and talents to offer.
Let us give thanks for everyone
God has called here today.
**Amen.**

**A gathering prayer**

Coming together,
let us open our eyes to see Jesus
in the faces of our sisters and brothers.
Open your hearts and minds
that we may respect and value one another.
All of us gathered here are God’s beloved children.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of approach**

God of grace and glory, we come to you in awe and wonder,
for you are the Lord of all creation.
You have made us in your image and likeness,
and called us to be your children.
You have chosen us to be your heirs,
and invited us to share in your kingdom.
Help us to worship you in spirit and in truth,
to listen to your Word with faith and obedience,
to receive your grace with humility and gratitude
and to share your love with justice and mercy.
We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of adoration**

Holy God, you show no favouritism but welcome all
into your kingdom – all have a place with you.
Your heart is for the poor and those on the margins –
you embrace the weak and needy.
Your compassion is everlasting and your mercy never fails.
We adore you, O God, with all our heart, soul,
mind and strength.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

Lord, we confess that we do not always
welcome people as you do.
We have passed judgement on others
instead of looking at them with love.
We have been impressed by wealth and fine things,
rather than seeing the whole person.
Forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.
Help us to be doers of the Word, and not just hearers.
We pray in the name of Jesus Christ.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Loving God, thank you for your free and generous forgiveness.
We receive it in humility and with joy.
**Amen.**

**People bingo W E A**

**Appreciating the diversity around us**

You will need: People bingo sheets ([template](https://www.rootsontheweb.com/media/27201/aaa-people-bingo-8-sept.pdf)), one per person; pens.

* We naturally gravitate towards people who are like us. We find places we feel comfortable and understood or that are familiar. It can make our churches, sports teams and social media an ‘echo chamber’ where we only hear voices that sound like us and have similar opinions and experiences. But church can be one of the places where we experience a broader demographic and worship shoulder to shoulder with those who have different backgrounds from us.
* Play a game of ‘people bingo’ to find people who are very different to you and get them to sign your board, appreciating the diversity around us.

**An honest conversation E A**

**Consider how we treat and respond to others**

You will need: a ‘marshmallow folk’ picture ([template](https://www.rootsontheweb.com/media/27205/cy-an-honest-conversation-8-sept.pdf)) or other images which includes a variety of people for each of the group.

* Invite the group to look at the image and ask them all to use different colours to shade in the following:
	+ The most interesting person
	+ The most annoying person
	+ The person you’d most like to talk to
	+ The person most in need of help
	+ The person most like you
* Emphasise that there are no right or wrong answers, but the young people should be as honest as possible.
* Talk to the group about the church to whom James was writing. The people had fallen into bad habits in their treatment of others, but they probably didn’t set out to, or even know they were doing it. We all have biases, based on our personalities, backgrounds, etc.
* Talk about the choices the young people have made – where are they different from one another and what does that tell us?
* Finally ask everyone to think quietly about who they would struggle to welcome the most – could they manage it if they had to?

**Psalm 146, James 2.1-17**

Seven years, two months and twenty days after a fire that engulfed the Grenfell Tower in London killing 72 people, the final public inquiry report into the disaster has been published ([BBC](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/live/c623vrw92rrt); [The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/ng-interactive/2018/may/14/lives-of-grenfell-tower-victims-fire)).

And it is quite a report. Within the 1700 pages not many parties escape the forensic spotlight and not many parties come out of the inquiry without serious criticism of the part they played or mistakes they made.

One of the important features of the report is the fact that the chair, Sir Martin Moore-Bick, and his panel had such wide-ranging access to the multiple groups and people involved: politicians, builders, cladding manufacturers, the fire brigade and many others.  Reports of this magnitude are always powerful. Nobody is given preferable treatment; no one is favoured, all are subject to the same questions, same analysis, the same scrutiny. Reports like this can feel like rare moments when the social, class and educational structures that often divide us are levelled in the quest for truth. Power, wealth and social might are held to account.

For the victims' families and residents who escaped the fire the report allows them a moment when their voices are truly heard. The voices of the least are, for once, louder than the noise of power.

And it can be hard to hear the voices of the least. Those with wealth and power command attention in a way that is hard to resist. The recipients of James’ letter clearly had the same issues that beset society today. Those with ‘gold rings’ and ‘fine clothes’ were attended to, whist a ‘poor person in dirty clothes’ ignored. As the letter of James so emphatically puts it ‘if you show partiality you commit sin’.

The Housing Ombudsman said that social housing tenants are "treated as second class citizens." Angela Rayner - deputy PM and housing secretary was asked how she will stop this.

Rayner says there is a "culture in this country where [tenants] are considered lesser people, and that's disgraceful."

She says they will make sure tenants have a voice and have legislation that protects them and that she recognises people are currently "scared" to raise their concerns

Whist the publication of the Grenfell report creates a moment where favouritism is forbidden, the real question will be whether social change results; whether those who have been held to account take account of their actions and seek transformation; or whether they hide again behind their gold rings and fine clothes and rebuild the social structures that elevate their voices and quiet the sound of others.

The victims of Grenfall and the survivors still call for justice and those to blame to be prosecuted – though that is unliulely for another two years.

But we know that God has chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and, in his kingdom, all are seen, all are heard and all are held to account.

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In this chapter James uses the law of love your neighbour as yourself and tackles head on the problem of discrimination in the Christian community. In James’ view, ‘acts of favouritism’ are inconsistent with the Christian faith. He maintains that faith in Jesus Christ bears directly upon our treatment of persons. Thus signs of snobbery and partiality in the Christian community prompt the incredulous question which is expressed in verse one of chapter two ‘My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?’ (NRS Version)

He uses an example which he suggests is incompatible with Christian faith. Two visitors are depicted as entering the Christian assembly: one bejewelled and one bedraggled: one from the lap of luxury and the other perhaps from the streets. These sharply contrasted people are given sharply contrasting receptions. The bejewelled visitor is treated with extreme courtesy while the bedraggled visitor is brusquely shuffled to one side When Christians make distinctions among themselves in any such manner have they not judged with wrong standards asks James?

For James this kind of snobbery is far from trivial. He presents three grounds on which acts of favouritism constitute a serious denial of faith. First he reminds his readers of God’s special care and concern for the poor – a concern that is expressed throughout the scriptures. It should be clear then that when members of the Christian community ignore the poor, they are not reflecting God’s compassion. When they slight the poor, they dishonour those whom God has honoured, whom God has ‘chosen’ to be ‘rich in faith’ and heirs of the kingdom. How is it that the prejudices of the world rather than the preferences of God come to be manifested in a community of God’s people?

It seems quite contradictory that at the start James says show no favouritism – but here seems to suggest God has a special concern for the poor. If we love our neighbour as we love ourselves we are going to be moved to compassion and action when we see our neighbour struggling. You can’t remain neutral.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu once criticised churches that don’t take sides, that stay neutral in the face of injustice and oppression and grinding poverty. He said if an elephant is standing on a mouse’s tail, and we say we are neutral, it is the elephant and not the mouse who will appreciate your neutrality.

Second the author appeals to his readers own experiences. He suggests that acts of favouritism make little sense in light of the way they themselves are treated at the hands of the rich: ‘Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who pour contempt on the honoured name by which God has claimed you?’ verse 6-7

James’s letter reflects a time when persons of wealth were not often found in the church – at least not in communities with which the author was most closely associated. Members of the fledgling Christian community may well have been taken to court by the rich over such issues as debts, rents, and wages. They may consequently have found themselves regarded as objects for slander and gossip and disparaged as disloyal citizens. James regards any such treatment as blasphemy, for Christians bear the name of Jesus. In James view abuse of those who bear the name of Christ is abuse of Christ himself.

Thirdly, James insists that partiality towards the rich is also a transgression of the biblical principle of love your neighbour as yourself. The poor are as much your neighbour as the rich.

To underline the seriousness of all this James draws on the ancient Jewish doctrine of the complete unity of the divine law and contends that to violate the law at this one point is to break the law as a whole.

In verse 12 James reminds us that we are all accountable to God for our words and deeds. At the last day, every individual will stand before God. What will be determined at that point is not whether we are to be ‘saved’; we have already been saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ. What the judgement will reveal is whether or not we have misused the grace that is ours – whether or not we have embodied in our lives the possibilities the gospel offers.

Our practice of indiscriminate love towards all people will reveal whether we have allowed the grace and power of God to produce a transformation in our lives. If we have experienced the mercy and grace of God has that shown in how we have been merciful and gracious to others? Impartiality in all our doings is, in no small part, a sign of the integrity of our faith.

The fact that James speaks of ‘acts of favouritism’ should prompt us all to ponder all those experiences in which we have made snap judgements about others on the basis of outward appearance – perhaps on the basis of disability, race, dress, class, gender or age. From James’s perspective, discrimination of any kind is simply inconsistent with Christian faith.

It is in this context that James can issue his famous phrase that faith without works is dead. It has caused much controversy over the centuries. Luther famously regarded James as an epistle of straw because on the face of it, James seems to contradict the Reformation slogan of salvation by faith not by works. From James viewpoint, genuine faith cannot exist without producing this kind of works as the fruit of obedience. Faith is not just about beliefs, creeds, doctrines. It is about trust – how you live life as a result of those beliefs.

Playing favorites is easy; loving indiscriminately is hard. I read about Will Campbell (b. 1924) this week..

Campbell was born and raised in the rural and very poor deep south of Amite, Mississippi. He was "ordained" by family members at a local Baptist church when he was seventeen, and, in a delightfully improbable life, played a central role as an activist and agitator on behalf of African Americans.

 In 1957, for example, Campbell was one of four people who escorted the nine black students who integrated Little Rock's Central High School; and he was the only white person to attend the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. The hate mail from the white right poured in.

As he matured, Campbell had the uneasy feeling that he hated those redneck bigots who hated. He discovered how easy it was to play favorites and to oppress the oppressors. Strange, he thought, how he enjoyed thinking that God hated all the same people that he hated. He realized that he had created God in his own image, and after his own personal and political likeness. Through a series of encounters with unlikely "teachers," Campbell came to admit that after twenty years in ministry he had become little more than a "doctrinaire social activist," which was different than being a follower of Jesus.

The key? "I came to understand the nature of tragedy. And one who understands the nature of tragedy can never take sides." Campbell saw how he had played favorites and taken sides; he had subverted the indiscriminate love of God for all people without conditions, limits, or exceptions into a ministry of "liberal sophistication."

Acting upon these convictions, he started sipping whiskey with the Ku Klux Klan. He did their funerals and weddings, and even befriended the Grand Dragon of North Carolina, J.R. "Bob" Jones. When they were sick he emptied their bed pans. And then the hate mail came from the liberal left. In a 1976 interview for an oral history that he gave to the University of Southern Mississippi, he joked, "It's been a long time since I got a hate letter from the right. Now they come from the left."

Since God doesn't play favorites, Campbell concluded, neither should he.

The necessary connection between claiming to love God and proving that we love our fellow human beings became so embedded in the early Christian traditions that this teaching is repeated almost verbatim by Paul (Romans 13:8–9, Galatians 5:14), by James (James 2:8), and most memorably by John: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother" (1 John 4:20–21).

I don't know if I could make nice with the KKK like Will Campbell. But he surely points us in the right direction of indiscriminate love that doesn't play favorites. It's a way of life commended long ago by Saint Maximos the Confessor (580–662): "Blessed is the one who can love all people equally… always thinking good of everyone."

In her book, Out of the Salt Shaker and into the World, Rebecca Manley Pippert tells about a highly intelligent college student named Bill who had become a Christian. As so many college students do when they leave home, Bill explored his identity by rejecting some of his parents' beliefs. Following his generational norms, he never wore shoes, regardless of the weather. He always wore jeans with holes in them and a T-shirt regardless of the occasion. In fact, that's what he wore when he attended the university chapel services -- jeans, T-shirt and, of course, no shoes.

Summertime came and the university chapel services were on hiatus. The next Sunday Bill decided to visit a local church across the street from the campus. He arrived a little late, and the service had already started. The very-well-dressed church members who had arrived on time were sitting on all the seats at the back and along the centre aisle. As Bill walked down the aisle looking for a seat, there were no open spots. Because of his unusual fashion statement, no one in the congregation offered him a seat.

Bill walked all the way to the front and still didn't find a seat. Finding himself at the front with no seat, he sat down on the carpeted floor between the pulpit and the front pew. You can imagine the tension in the congregation. People were aghast. Not only was he not dressed for the occasion, but also by sitting on the floor at the front of the church, he was interrupting the service.

The tension was building when the focus switched to an elderly member of the congregation as he got up from his seat and began walking very slowly up the aisle toward Bill. People looked at each other as they wondered what the silver haired man in his three-piece suit would do. Would he politely tell the young man that he was dressed inappropriately? Would he help him to a pew? Would he escort him to the back of the church and out the door?

When the elderly dignified man finally made it to where Bill was sitting, he stopped. He didn't say a word. But with great deliberation, the old man slowly sat down next to the poorly dressed young man and put his arm around him. The two of them sat there and worshiped together.

Naturally, at first people were shocked. But as they thought about it, they were moved. They knew the older man had displayed the kind of love and acceptance that Christians are called to offer one another. When the minister gained control of his own emotions, he said, "What I'm about to preach, you will never remember. What you have just seen, you will never forget."

Fred Craddock tells the story of a missionary sent to preach the gospel in India near the end of World War II. After many months the time came for a furlough back home. His church wired him the money to book passage on a steamer but when he got to the port city he discovered a boat load of Jews had just been allowed to land temporarily. These were the days when European Jews were sailing all over the world literally looking for a place to live, and these particular Jews were staying in attics and warehouses and basements all over that port city.

It happened to be Christmas, and on Christmas morning, this missionary went to one of the attics where scores of Jews were staying. He walked in and said, "Merry Christmas." The people looked at him like he was crazy and responded, "We're Jews." "I know that," said the missionary, "What would you like for Christmas?" In utter amazement the Jews responded, "Why we'd like pastries, good pastries like the ones we used to have in Germany." So the missionary went out and used the money for his ticket home to buy pastries for all the Jews he could find staying in the port. Of course, then he had to wire home asking for more money to book his passage back to the States.

As you might expect, his superiors wired back asking what happened to the money they had already sent. He wired that he had used it to buy Christmas pastries for some Jews. His superiors wired back, "Why did you do that? They don't even believe in Jesus." He wired back: "Yes, but I do."

Once you start showing favouritism, you will run into a whole host of problems. Loving your neighbour as yourself, and honouring each other as chosen by God, rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, are important prayerful disciplines to maintain and keep before us. Hopefully these prayerful disciplines will keep in check our more aggressive and competitive natures and God’s Spirit will prompt us and guides us in how to translate our faith into positive action that is aligned with God’s values and concerns

**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

Generous God, thank you for the blessings of each day,
for friends and neighbours, work and leisure, nature and beauty.
Merciful God, thank you that you set prisoners free and bring
about justice for the oppressed.
You watch over strangers and uphold the vulnerable.
All praise to your glorious name.
**Amen.**

**Prayers of intercession**

God of harmony, we pray for peace throughout the world. We think of the Ukrainians after all they have suffered and for the residents of Gaza living in fear. We ask that you will give them comfort and strength. It is hard for us to pray for the aggressors in these conflicts but we commend them to you with all their needs and apprehensions.

Give us the courage and discernment
**Not to take sides in our prayers.**

God of compassion, we pray for the government and all members of parliament as they make decisions about the economy of our country. At times we will rejoice; at times we will be angry. May decision makers, those in authority and those whose role is opposition be guided and inspired by compassion and the general good.

Give us the courage and discernment
**Not to take sides in our prayers.**

God of healing, we pray for those who are waiting for tests or test results; for families and friends who are anxious. We think of those who will receive bad news this week and those who have to deliver bad news. We commend to you all who are ill at home and in hospital and those who look after them. Give wisdom and discernment to those who make management decisions

Give us the courage and discernment
**Not to take sides in our prayers.**

God present with and within us, we pray for ourselves especially concerning any decisions we have to make this week. Grant us wisdom that we may exercise good judgment. Grant us equity in all that we say and help us to ensure that our thoughts and attitudes are not biased. May we show fairness in all our relationships and interactions.

Give us the courage and discernment
**Not to take sides in our prayers.**

We ask that in the name of the one who loves all with the same boundless, immeasurable love.

**Amen**

**A prayer for all ages together**

Creator of all,
thank you for joining us together
in the love of Jesus Christ.
Thank you that we can celebrate
each one having different gifts to offer.
Help us to make people feel welcome in our church.
May we share the love of Jesus
with everyone we meet.
**Amen.**

**A sending out prayer**

Let us go and share God’s love
in the care of our neighbours,
building up community *(place one fist on top of the other)*
in the words we speak,
building up new friendships *(swap fists)*
by showing care,
building up God’s kingdom here on earth. *(move your arms round in a circle)*
**Amen.**