

Original - 8am

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Date: 03 January 1999

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[0 : 00] God, in your grace and mercy, grant that we may hear your word and that your word by which the whole universe was created might work in our hearts and lives to bring about those changes which bring honor to your name.

We ask this in your name. Amen. Please be seated. And if you will turn to the epistle of James, which is on page 212 in your pew Bible.

And let me say this to you, that God has very much blessed this parish in quite remarkable ways. This is my 20th new year connected to this parish.

And it's a remarkable story of God's faithfulness and what he has done. The difficulty is, though, that having arrived at this place, then things would go bad.

And we have to be constantly in a process of renewal. And David Short has thought it wise and given us instruction that for the first term of this new year, the preaching should be centered on the epistle of James.

[1 : 31] James. So James follows Hebrews. It's the first of the Catholic or general epistles that are named after the author rather than named after the destination.

And so you have James and Peter and John and Jude, the people who wrote them. James is reckoned to be the Lord's brother.

Now, exactly what that means is not clear because, as you may know, the Roman Catholic Church has difficulty with thinking the Lord had a brother.

And so just what his relationship was has been debated by scholars for roughly 2,000 years. And the interesting thing for me in reading a passage like the epistle to James is that it has been cut apart and sawn up and dissected and studied from every possible angle by all sorts of scholars with all sorts of hidden agendas for these 2,000 years.

And the fact that it stays together as a passage of Scripture subject to all that is quite remarkable. And I hope that it will be very rewarding for you to read it and to hear it taught during these weeks between now and the end of March and that it will become a great joy and a great resource to you.

[3 : 17] Now, the way the epistle works, this passage, and we're just looking at the first 11 verses of the first chapter this morning, the way that it works is that you find certain things here.

During the course of 1999, there are seven and a half weeks of Sundays so that that's a significant portion of the year, isn't it?

And what you will learn in these seven and a half weeks is important to you. At this age and stage in one's life, you'd like everything just to hold together for a little while longer and not get involved in too much drama or too much change.

This passage suggests that the change that's involved is perpetual and it must go on and on and on. And you must accept that. And you can't come to church for the sake of trying to hold things together.

You have to come to church in order to carry on with the process which God is at work in you and in me. So this tells you about how that happens.

[4 : 41] And I want to tell you the various things that come out in this passage concerning God's work in us. The first thing he does in verse 1 is to tell us who we are.

That is, we are of the 12 tribes in the dispersion. You are part of this dispersion.

And it's... At that time in history, James was... He was not the brother of John.

He's the one who Paul addresses as one of the pillars of the church along with Peter and John. And when Paul began his ministry, he came to Peter and James and John and submitted to them the evidence of the grace of God at work in him and through his ministry.

And they accepted him. So James was, I suppose, debatably the first pope because... rather than Peter because he was the one to whom they went in Jerusalem and who seems to have been the head of the church in Jerusalem.

[5 : 58] But he calls himself a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. Which is different, you see, from Paul who says, Paul, I am an apostle of Jesus Christ.

James calls himself a servant. A servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. And that he's addressing the twelve tribes in the dispersion. Now, of course, James was Jewish and he belonged to one of the twelve tribes.

And he was very much aware that the Jewish nation had been dispersed throughout the Mediterranean world. And it was along the lines of that dispersion that the Christian gospel first went out to the synagogues of the various...

in the various cities in the Mediterranean world. And so James very, I think, brilliantly shows us that what...

and we read about this in Joshua this morning. What were the twelve tribes of Israel? Interestingly, you see, the twelve tribes of Israel were the sons of Jacob.

[7 : 08] Jacob. And the Greek name for James is Jacobus. He is Jacob too.

And so he sees the church as not being based now on the sort of bloodlines of the twelve tribes of Israel, but on the teaching of the twelve apostles.

And so he says that we are the dispersion of the twelve tribes, not by blood, the children of Jacob or Israel, but by faith, the children of God through faith in Jesus Christ, according to the testimony of the twelve apostles.

So that's how he identifies what the church is. If you read in the sun yesterday, you would read about the two percent of the people in India, of the nine hundred and sixty million people in India, two percent of them are Christians.

And that's what dispersion means. It means this small group among a great many. If you, any of you read the letter from Bishop Colin Baisley, who's the bishop in Chile, and he writes about, he writes about the tiny churches in four cities in the province of Antofagasto, and these are, their average attendance on a Sunday is 20 people.

[8 : 52] They are lay-led congregations in a vast city, and they are part of the dispersion. And St. John's, for all its immediate prominence and significance as a parish, is still only part of the dispersion.

And that seems to be, and James points this out, that seems to be because it is the purpose of God through the Christian communities dispersed worldwide to set up a picture of what God intends his people to be.

This is what we are to be. And the purpose of that is not that we are to be those who enjoy the favor of God, but we are to be those who face the reality of our world, and by the grace and mercy of God are able to live our lives out so as to bear witness to the whole world of God's coming kingdom and of God's purpose in all of our lives.

Am I getting too thick for you? Look, keep looking at the text and you'll know where I'm coming from at least. but that's, let me now just tell you the things that need to happen.

And the way I want to present this to you is this, that Michael Bentley told you how much money is expected of the congregation in order to meet the bills for the year.

[10 : 37] And what I want to tell you about is what you may expect of the church in order to fulfill God's purpose in your life. And so I want just to look through this text and show you what's there.

First, then there is your identity as part of the dispersion of the twelve tribes. And then it goes on to say this about you, that that your life will be made up of trials.

You see where it says when you meet various trials, it seems confident that you will meet various trials. The Greek word which is translated as trials means not only those circumstances which come upon you from without that you have to meet, but the various trials that come from within as you face the temptations that all flesh is subject to.

So the trials are both from within and from without. And James says that you will find that your life is made up of these trials.

But they, and that's what life is. You know, we tend to think that to escape the trials is what life is about, but James is much more practical and realistic and he says you accept the trials and recognize that that's what your life will be made up of day by day, week by week, and month by

month.

[12:19] And if you're hiding from them, you might take time to write down now the trials that you're subject to at the moment. Trials which emerge from within you, and trials which are forced, in a sense, upon you from the outside.

So in those trials, you find that there is a protest of testing and it is to be met with joy.

Now this seems utterly contradictory because trials and joy don't seem to go together. But what James is saying to you is that there is a joy in knowing that Jesus Christ, our Lord, has gone before us through the trials.

He has been made perfect. He has become the author of our salvation and he has won for us victory over death and opened to us the way into heaven.

Remember how in the lesson from Joshua this morning it talked about going through the river Jordan and all of them taking, the members of all the different tribes taking up stones out of the river and they were to take those stones through and with them into this new land and generation after generation would say what do those stones mean?

[13:58] Well, those stones are representing a remembrance of God's grace in bringing them out of the wilderness through the Jordan and into the promised land.

So our joy comes from, in a sense, what Jesus Christ has done for us. And when we ask what does the cross mean?

The cross means that Jesus has won a victory for us and that victory is the source of our joy no matter what the circumstances of our life may be.

No matter what trials we may be afflicted by, that cross is the source of our joy. And that's why James says to you, count it all joy, brethren, when you run into various trials because you are on the path in which Jesus has gone before and claimed the promised land, as it were.

And for the joy of that, you submit to the trials. But then it goes on to say what else the trials do for you. If you look at it, you'll see that you are to meet the trials with steadfastness, with forbearance, with a kind of determination to go on.

[15:26] And that forbearance will bring you to perfection. That, that's, now that's, you may not, you know, we live in a world which thinks that we're all subject to some kind of evolution.

Well, we are subject to some kind of evolution. That God is doing a continuing work in us. As we face trials with steadfastness, the end result is to bring us to maturity and to perfection.

And Jesus, we're told, was made perfect through the things that he suffered. suffered. And we are to be made perfect in the same way through the trials and tribulations which afflict us in the course of our earthly lives.

So, that process is that you're involved in these trials and afflictions, and because of that, you need the help of one another.

You don't handle these things by yourself. You need someone with you. You need the fellowship of the church. The reason we get involved in Bible studies and prayer meetings all the time, which people may think is a bit absurd, is because you're sharing with one another the trials and afflictions to which you are subject and finding encouragement from one another to be steadfast in the face of that.

[17:07] And so, that's because God is bringing you through that process by this testing to a state of perfection. Well, are you with me still?

Let me go on. In that steadfastness, you will be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing, so that right now, you and I are somewhat short of perfection.

Did you realize that? There's wonderful reminders that we've been given. If you're not aware of that, I'm sure you can become aware of that by talking to some of your close friends who will help you to see that you are somewhat short of perfection.

But it is God's purpose to bring you to this maturity and to this perfection. And then he goes on to say that the next thing that happens is if you lack wisdom.

Now, wisdom, of course, seems to be one of the great objects of biblical teaching. It's certainly one of the great objects of the book of Proverbs and the book of Psalms and the book of Ecclesiastes and what we call the wisdom literature.

[18:25] It says that if any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God and he will give it. So that the process is with light, with joy, through trials, by forbearance, you come to maturity in the process of which if you lack wisdom, that's available to you from a God who is utterly generous.

generous in a way, in the way that we're not. Because generous because God gives wisdom to us with in the sort of picture of God's grace.

But the difference is, you see, he doesn't give it, what James says, he doesn't give it with, he says he gives it generously and without reproach.

He doesn't say to you when you ask wisdom, what did you do with the last piece of wisdom I gave you? Seems to me you ignored it. So why do you think I should give you some more?

That's not what it says. It says that God gives it generously and without reproach. it's available to you in spite of the fact that you may have misused it the last time you had it.

[19 : 54] So it's that wisdom that becomes available to us. And that's the wisdom that we share with one another because you in the course of your trials and tribulations share with me how you found God's grace in them and I share with you how I found God's grace and we encourage one another in claiming the wisdom that God makes available to us.

But there is one condition on this wisdom which is available and that is that we've got to make up our mind as to which way we're going. We're not to be as people who go with the flow who just wait for whatever we're not to be surfers as it were.

I hesitate to use this illustration because of course it seems altogether likely that the rector of the parish is today which in Australia is tomorrow is out surfing waiting for a wind to come along and that will carry him on the waves.

Well that's what's spoken of here as unacceptable in our spiritual lives. We're not to be surfers. We're not to be religious surfers trying the latest spiritual idea.

We're not to be intellectual or philosophical surfers. We're to be committed as to where we are going. We've made up our minds to be the servants of God and of Jesus Christ.

[21 : 34] And then having done that then James moves on to another thing, another one of the dynamics that take place in our relationship to one another within the church.

There are those of us whom James describes as brothers of lowly brothers or brothers in humble circumstances.

And they are to know, they are to come to church in order that they may know of their exaltation as those who are in Christ. So that the lowly brother is to be brought up and exalted and reminded of all that he has because of his being in Christ.

And the rich one, which is what James goes on to describe, is to be given at church a wonderful experience of humiliation to find out how really insignificant he is.

And so this process is to go on in the church all the time. The brother of humble circumstances is to know how exalted he is in the sight of God. And the one who is rich and is exalted in the world is to find out how humble it would be appropriate for him to be under the circumstances.

[22 : 57] And the rest of the passage down to the end of verse 11 describes how that process of humiliation is to work. Well, let me just conclude by saying this to you.

On the Christmas Eve bulletin, David wrote a paragraph which concluded with the words, Receiving the Christ child means more than celebration.

It means a profound change for each of us at the level of how we understand ourselves. And it's this profound change that James is describing how it works.

It's light in the midst of trials which are met with forbearance, which lead to maturity, and wisdom is supplied to you along the way as you keep going.

If you're not going anywhere, you don't get any as you keep going. Then, if you are a brother or sister of humble circumstances, you might know how exalted you are in the sight of God.

[24 : 12] If you are rich and powerful, you might experience some of the humiliation of the reality of the shortness and uncertainty of human life and the unreality of building your life upon what you yourself have achieved.

You need to build your life on what God has done for you in Christ. And all this is to happen. And this is a process of dynamic change, change which David in his message described at the level of how we understand ourselves.

And so, these seven and a half weeks that you'll spend in church this year are to be, are to help you through this process that James describes, to help you to allow that change which it is God's purpose to affect in you because you lack maturity and perfection, he will provide it because you lack wisdom, he will give it generously.

To do that and bring about the change which will bring our lives into line with God's purpose for us, and that you may continue in that, in that process of change in the fellowship of the church under the direction of the word of God.

I invite you to receive the Holy Communion this morning with that passage in mind as to what God is doing in you and for you and through one another in our lives.

[25 : 50] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.