

“GETTING STUCK IN”
James 5:1-20

Well, as you’ve already heard, we have been looking at this letter from James to the new Christians in the churches which were growing up around the Mediterranean during the first few years after Jesus had been on earth. He’s been describing to them what living as a follower of Jesus Christ should look like. It’s all been pretty basic and practical – on the face of it, fairly elementary. But it’s the living out of our faith that is the most important thing. You can’t internalise your faith: you can’t talk about being a Christian, wanting to follow the teaching of Jesus, respecting what he said if you don’t actually do it in your life. And for many people outside the church, that’s the real problem with Christians – they don’t practice what they preach.

Now putting your faith into practice is quite important this morning. The MOB are in the middle of their “social action” weekend as part of the *Hope ’08* project. It’s about **action**, about **doing** things that will make a difference (albeit a small difference) to this community. And the promises which Paul, Helen and the godparents have made to do with little Laura are also pretty hot on action. The parents promised to set an “*example*” to her and the godparents pledged to support the family with “*prayer and action*”.

The trouble is, it’s never as easy to do things as to talk about them. Putting stuff into practice is hard work and, if it’s to be done consistently and with integrity, it can be very wearing. So in this last chapter, with characteristic directness, James sets out his advice, his instructions, for keeping on keeping on. As with the rest of the letter, it is a bit of a mixed blessing for preachers. What he writes is so direct, so obvious, that there isn’t really any need to say much about it. How can the preacher embellish what is so straightforward? And that’s a good thing for you, the congregation – especially this morning with so many other things happening in this service – it means that, unless he really waffles on, the preacher won’t say too much. So let’s get stuck in – and I just want to headline the three sections that this chapter seems to divide into. To help you remember, they are three ‘P’s: **Penitence, Patience and Persistence**.

1. PENITENCE (vv1-6)

It’s often the case that we are unaware of the effect our actions are having on the lives of others. Particularly in a culture that is pretty complex both socially and economically, we can end up a long way removed from many people, particularly in other communities and in other countries. So we don’t realise the consequences for others of our own routine behaviour. James is talking here particularly to the rich, to those who have a certain amount of wealth. And he is concerned about how they use their wealth in relation to those who are poor.

Now, the Bible never condemns wealth *per se*. God sees nothing wrong with people acquiring riches – here described in terms of gold, silver and smart clothing. But what the Bible does make very clear is that there is a real responsibility of those who have wealth to use it wisely. And wealth should not be acquired by impoverishing others. What he mentions here has been acquired at the expense of others – usually the labour of others, many of whom have not been treated properly. The workers have not been paid fairly. Those who are rich have not used their wealth wisely – they have hoarded it and it as begun to rot. They have used their wealth for “*self-indulgence*”, not for the common good.

In James’s day, that would be easier to spot than today because the goods were provided by people in their own community, people they would see regularly. Today we buy goods that are produced by faceless workers in distant countries. We are shielded from them by several tiers of middle-men. But it is still true that we in the prosperous west are far, far richer than the majority of the world’s population, who work hard to provide our luxury goods. Our wealth is gathered at the expense of others elsewhere. And we do tend to hoard things – gold and silver in bank accounts and pension funds, garments in overstuffed wardrobes – almost as if we are fattening ourselves up like prize cattle (an image used elsewhere in the Bible) ready for the slaughter.

James clearly regards this as contrary to the way disciples of Jesus should act and tells the rich people who behave like this to “*weep and wail*” (the Greek word is better translated “*howl*”) because of the long-term consequences of their greed. Think about what you are accumulating and consider what effect it is having on others who can only dream of the kind of life-style you are pursuing. Be penitent – ask God’s forgiveness for your selfishness – and use what God has provided for you with real generosity towards those who are worse off than yourself.

2. **PATIENCE** (vv7-12)

The advice to “*weep and wail*” is given because, in the end, God will put it all to rights and his judgement on those who have ignored him will be terrible and eternal. But in the mean time, people are wondering just when things will be put right. “*If there’s a God I heaven, what’s he waiting for?*” sang Elton John. That’s when we need patience. “*The Lord is full of compassion and mercy,*” says James. He is giving people time to get themselves right with him. It will all work out in the end. The example he gives is of the farmer waiting for rain. He knows it will come eventually, but isn’t quite sure exactly when. God will sort things out, but we don’t know how long we have to wait.

So, while we wait, we need patience. And James, practical and down-to-earth as ever, says that one of the areas in which we need that is with each other. “*Don’t grumble against each other,*” he says. He’s hit the nail on the head there! The most annoying things in church life, in our workplaces, in our families, in our communities are usually other people. They can be so difficult to get on with. They rub you up the wrong way. They don’t see things the same way as you do. They are a pain in the neck. But we must learn to tolerate them, as Jesus taught his disciples. It is that love for one another which is the mark of the authentic Christian community, he said. Be patient with them, and be patient when things go wrong – “*Be patient in the face of suffering*”. God will watch out for you and help you if you call out to him. Which is what the last bit is about.

3. **PERSISTENCE** (vv13-18)

Keep plugging away at it in prayer. Things don’t always come right overnight. In fact, I think they very rarely come right overnight. So we have to keep praying, say James. Keep praying in your daily lives – in times of anxiety and times of joy, in times of illness and in times when you know you need forgiveness, praying for yourself and for each other. And pray, too, in special circumstances – like Elijah did during the drought.

There will be a great opportunity to get involved in that next week in our 24/7 Prayer week. You can come and pray persistently in the Darwin Room during the week 11th – 18th May. Pick an hour and join in an unbroken chain of persistent prayer for our church and our community. I believe God is going to do great things that week and it would be a shame if you missed out on it. There’s details up in the Lichfield Room and a timetable for you to fill in when you’d like to come and pray.

But you don’t really need a special place or a special time to pray. Keep at it. Be persistent. Pray for patience to cope with the things that life (and other people) throw at you. Pray penitently for God’s help using what he has given you wisely. God is a God of infinite love and mercy: he **will** respond if you call to him.

4. **A FINAL EXHORTATION** (vv19,20)

Which leaves us with the very last couple of verses. James is very concerned about those who are not part of the Christian community, who do not know the true extent of Jesus’ love for them. For one reason or another they have “*wandered from the truth*”, they are unaware that God’s great compassion and

mercy truly is extended to them. There may be some of you here this morning for whom this has all been a bit strange. You aren't too sure what we've really been doing. You don't really understand what this Bible lark is all about. But you know, deep within yourself, that life has more to offer than you've really experienced so far. And you'd like to be a bit more sure about what will happen to you when this life is over. Well, we want to give you the opportunity to discover a bit more about it. Maybe something I've said this morning, something someone else has said, a line from a song or something you have seen has set off some thoughts and you want to follow that a bit further. If that's the case, then come and have a word with me afterwards. Don't leave this place if you sense that something has been happening in your mind, your heart that needs following up. I'm not going to ask you for any money or make you sign on any dotted line or embarrass you in front of your friends and family, but I would like to help you find your way back to the God who made you, who loves you and who has an amazing future set out for you if you want to accept it.