

Today we are starting our sermon series in which we will be preaching on the book of James. This will run alongside the Lent group we are holding on Tuesdays and Wednesday during and just after Lent.

So why James? Let's consider where the book came from, especially when you realise that of the 27 books the New Testament the one that was quite possibly the last book to be allowed into the bible – and indeed as late as the 16<sup>th</sup> Century the protestant reformer Martin Luther would have gladly banned its inclusion from the bible altogether – is the book of James.

So what happened? The first list of New Testament books ever to be compiled is known as the Muratorian Canon, which dates from about 170 AD – and James was absent from it. The first appearance of James was in a manuscript called the Codex Corbeiensis, which dates to about 350 AD, but not with the universally acknowledged New Testament books but with a collection of religious tracts written by the early fathers. The book did not appear fully in the New Testament until it was included by a biblical scholar called Jerome in a version of the New Testament called the Vulgate, completed early in the fifth century. Even then there was some doubt, though, about who James actually was.

I don't know about you, but when I'm looking for a book I often consider three things – the cover, the title and the author. We clearly don't have a cover to consider. We do have a title: the Letter of James. A good many of the letters in the New Testament are written by Paul, and they generally have a greeting, quite a lot of substance in the middle, and then often a very welcome chatty bit at the end, because they are written to a specific group of people. The letter of James is written to pretty much everyone in the worldwide church, and so the title tells us very little, apart from the name of the author.

The very first verse tells us that the letter is written by James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. But which James?

Well, there are basically 6 possibilities.

First, the father of the disciple called Judas, not Judas Iscariot, was called James. Luke tells us this in both his gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles. But that is all we know about him.

Second, James the Less or younger, and all we know about him was that his mother was one of the women visiting the tomb of Jesus at the resurrection.

Third, James son of Alphaeus, who was one of the 12 disciples – and of him we hear nothing more.

So we can pretty much say that there is no evidence that any of these three were significant enough to be writing a letter to the worldwide church.

Fourth, James the son of Zebedee and the brother of the apostle John and also one of the 12 disciples about whom we do hear various episodes including when their Mum asked Jesus to keep a special place for them in heaven.

Fifth, James the brother of Jesus, son of Mary, who I'll come back to in a minute.

And finally, sixth, someone else called James who is never mentioned in the bible, or in the historical books written after the bible was written.

If we discount the first three on our list because we don't know enough about them to consider them to be the author, and if we assume the author is not just some random other James we know nothing absolutely about, then we come down to two. There is James the Son of Zebedee, who after a period of Mission work in Spain was beheaded by Herod Agrippa I in the year AD 44. Whilst many believe that the book of James may well be the earliest written book in the New Testament, nobody believes that

anything was written down as early as AD44 and so this counts James the Son of Zebedee out as the author. So, rather by default, we come to the conclusion that letter of James was written by James the brother of Jesus.

So, what do we know about this man? As we read the gospels one thing is very clear – that up to Jesus' death and resurrection none of Jesus brothers or sisters believed in him, including James. In Mark chapter 6 we hear of Jesus' rejection by the people of Nazareth who said – "Is this not the carpenter, the Son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us? And they took offence at him."

So, we know that our James was one of at least seven children of Mary – but that at this point he didn't believe in his eldest brother. This is also confirmed in John's gospel – and it is in John's story of the crucifixion that we get our next clue about James. Amongst those standing at the cross were Mary, mother of Jesus and the disciple whom Jesus loved – generally believed to be John. And Jesus said to his mother, "Woman here is your Son" and to John, "Here is your mother." Jesus was passing the care of his mother to the disciple who believed in him, because his natural eldest brother, James, who would be expected to care for his mother, did not.

So when did this change. After the ascension of Jesus into heaven as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, we here about the meeting of Jesus' followers in an upstairs room. Who was there – as his followers? We hear that the 11 remaining disciples were there, all constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

His brothers, including our James, have become followers of Jesus, later confirmed by Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians when he lists the people who Jesus appeared to after the resurrection, including the line, "Then he appeared to James,"

The very fact that Paul singles out James to be mentioned by name is surely an indication that James was not only now a believer, which probably happened at, or soon after the resurrection, but was a significant person in the church of that time.

In fact James became the leader of the Jerusalem church. Not only this but he stayed in Jerusalem. No great missionary journeys for him – he was, we believe a law loving Jew, maybe even a Pharisee, who became a follower of Jesus. It was James that mediated the argument between Peter and Paul as to whether Gentiles who became Christians should first become Jews – that is to say to be circumcised. James' mission was to teach people how to be good Christians.

But before we move on to the book itself, what about Martin Luther and his desire to have the book of James removed from the New Testament. In typically unsubtle language, in his preface to the New Testament which he published, Luther said this:

"In sum: the gospel and the first epistle of St John, St Paul's epistles, especially those to the Romans, Galatians and Ephesians; and St Peter's first epistle, are the books which show Christ to you. They teach everything you need to know for your salvation, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or hear any other teaching. In comparison with these, the epistle of James is an epistle full of straw, because it contains nothing evangelical."

So, you may still ask why we choose to study James this Lent? The answer is that we have moved on since Luther's day, and opinions about the relative importance of books of the New Testament have changed. Yes, Luther's list may well teach you what you need to know about Jesus the Messiah, and how he saved us from our sins and gave us eternal life, but we can also learn much from the other three gospels where we are told things that happen in Jesus' life that John omits; we can learn much about the

early church from Luke's second book – the Acts of the Apostles; we can learn much about the end of time from The Revelation of John, and the list goes on. And we can learn a lot about discipleship, about how to live our lives as Christians, how to live with our faith, from the book of James. I have always considered James to be one of the most helpful books in the New Testament – and so I, for one, was delighted that Angela chose it for this year's study.

So, having explained all that about where the book comes from, I want to focus very briefly today on just two things from those first eight verses that we have heard read to us: being joyful when you face trials and never doubting your faith.

Being joyful when you face trials is something that hardly comes naturally to us. The trials that James talks about could also be translated as meaning being tested. How many people wake up in a morning, remember what the day holds and says, "How absolutely wonderful – I have to go to the dentist today!" Or when you get out of bed and that awful back pain you had last night is still there, you immediately burst into a song of uncontrollable joy."

The point is, though, one thing that James never claims – in fact one thing that Jesus never claimed – is that being a Christian is easy. Nobody will ever say to you, "Become a Christian – it will be an easy, smooth ride; you will never be challenged, you will never doubt what you are doing." And how do we become better Christians – by going into training. By being tested.

Do you for one moment believe that an athlete, wanting to be in the best condition that they can be when it comes to a race, will face each training session with nothing but a smile on their face? Yes you may be tired, says the trainer, but unless you run another 5 miles, unless you spend another hour on those weights, you will not improve and you will not win.

Facing trials, being tested, is what we need to do in anything to improve. A young bird is said to test its wings. God was said to test Abraham when he appeared to be demanding the sacrifice of Isaac. When Israel came to the promised land God did not remove the people who were already there. He left them so that Israel might be tested in the struggle against them.

So when these trials, this being tested, we must remember there is a point to it; it is part of our training to become better disciples; it may be hard, it may be painful, but it will be worth it, and so we should smile – as much as we can.

And then doubting your faith. There has been much talk in the Lent groups (and this morning) about waves representing our doubts. My story about waves comes from last summer. I was recovering from the my second knee replacement and we were at the seaside, and the waves were pretty strong. And I was simply too scared to go into the sea because I had no confidence in what would happen when I was hit by a wave. Would I lose my balance and fall over and then could I get up again before the next wave came. If I fell would it hurt my knee? Would it damage my knee? So I didn't risk it. And actually that was the sensible thing to do – in the sea, with those waves, on that day.

But if we put ourselves in our virtual sea, where we stand up, and say this is what I believe, are we ready for the waves that will, most certainly come. James suggested that the movement of those waves represent our doubts, and if we doubt, those waves will come and knock us over into the sea. If we let our doubts win then, James says, "we should not expect to receive anything from the Lord." Does this all sound to you to be more than a little harsh? Of course we all have doubts, and to pretend that we don't would be foolish. But I think we are forgetting something vitally important.

This letter is written by James, a good, solid Jew who will try his level best, day in, day out, to obey those laws as laid down in the Old Testament, as Jesus would have done. James' teaching is based on solid

principles. We will see as we go through the letter of James that much of his teaching in the letter is based on the Sermon on the Mount – that passage in Matthew's gospel where Jesus teaches us solid rules of how to live. I don't think that James is expecting perfection – what I think James is expecting is that we don't stop believing. We don't stop trying.

So let's enjoy the book of James over the course of this series. Let's learn from it how to be better disciples of Jesus. Let us remember who this James was who is giving us this advice. Let us remember that, despite Martin Luther's efforts, this is a book of the bible, and we can learn from it. Let us stick to our training and whenever we possibly can enjoy it because we know where it can lead. And never stop believing. Amen