

From our reading from the letter of James just one verse: So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

From the book of Genesis, quoted in our Lent course this week. After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt-offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.'

From our gospel reading: Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.'

From the baptism service: In baptism, God calls us out of darkness into his marvellous light. To follow Christ means dying to sin and raising to new life with him.

This morning I want to see how each of those three extracts relate to that one line from this week's passage from James..

But first let me tell you about a lady called Amy Carmichael.

Amy was born in the small village of Millisle, County Down, Ireland, in 1867, as the oldest of seven siblings, both her parents being devout Christians.

Amy's father moved the family to Belfast when she was 16 years old, but he died two years later, leaving the family financially challenged. Despite this, in the mid-1880s, Amy started a Sunday-morning class for the 'Shawlies' (mill girls who wore shawls instead of hats) in a local church hall. This mission grew quickly to include several hundred attendees, and rapidly ran out of space. At this time Amy saw an advertisement in The Christian magazine for an iron hall that could be erected for £500 and would seat 500 people so she prayed for the means to build an iron hall. Two donations, £500 from one lady and a plot of land from a mill owner, led to the erection of the first "Welcome Hall".

Amy continued at the Welcome until she received a call to work among the mill girls of Manchester in 1889, and then she felt God calling her to overseas missionary work. She applied to the China Inland Mission but after initially being

accepted it was determined that her health made her unfit for the work forcing her to postpone her missionary career.

When her health improved, Amy initially travelled to Japan, staying for fifteen months, but returned home again for health reasons. After a brief period of service in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), she went to Bangalore, India, initially for her health, but then chose to stay to continue her work as a missionary. Amy's most notable work was with girls and young women, who were being treated very badly in Hindu temples and to this end she founded the Dohnavur Fellowship in 1901, thirty miles from India's southern tip. This became a sanctuary for many of these children.

Amy often said that this ministry started with a girl named Preena. Having become a temple servant against her wishes, Preena managed to escape and Amy provided her shelter and withstood the threats of those who insisted that the girl be returned to the temple. The number of such incidents soon grew, thus beginning Amy Carmichael's new ministry.

In 1912, money and workers were available that helped fund a hospital at Dohnavur. By 1913, the Dohnavur Fellowship was serving 130 girls and in 1918, Dohnavur added a home for young boys.

Amy had decided that she was called to remain single, and to serve God in her ministry: she spent two thirds of her life in Dohnavur – she died in India in 1951 aged 83.

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People still make decisions about their lives as their faith grows today.

Justin Welby, the current Archbishop of Canterbury, was educated at St Peter's School, Seaford, Eton College; and Trinity College, Cambridge. He graduated in 1978 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in history and law.

In a 2013 interview with The Daily Telegraph, Justin talked about his conversion experience when he was a student at Trinity College, Cambridge. He said that, while he was at Eton, he had "vaguely assumed there was a God. But I didn't believe. I wasn't interested at all."

However, during the evening of 12 October 1975 in Cambridge, praying with a Christian friend, Justin said that he suddenly felt "a clear sense of something changing, the presence of something that had not been there before in my life".

After university Justin worked for the oil industry for 11 years, but then he sensed a calling from God to be ordained, so he gave up his career in the oil industry to train for ordination and was ordained in 1992. He then became a curate in Nuneaton from and then led churches in, Southam and in Ufton.

Following further appointments at Coventry and Liverpool Cathedrals, he was appointed Bishop of Durham in 2010. "I was astonished to be offered the role," he later said. Talking about his vision for the diocese he said "I have a passionate desire to see a church that is vigorously full of spiritual life, serving Jesus Christ and serving those around it."

Just 2 years later Justin Welby's appointment to the position of Archbishop of Canterbury was announced on 9 November 2012. In January 2013, he said that he initially thought it was "a joke" and "perfectly absurd" for him to be appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, because he had only been a bishop for such a short time. Justin has led the Anglican church now for just over 10 years.

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Now let me tell you about someone called Jo (could be Joseph or Josephine) Public.

Jo has had a fairly, what you might call, normal life. Jo did quite well at school, but decided that university was not for them. Instead Jo got a pretty reasonable job, got married, has three children, and now also has two grandchildren.

Each year Jo buys a poppy, puts some money in the Christian Aid envelope, phones in to Children In Need, and has recently started making sure that something extra is always added to the shopping basket which gets left in the foodbank baskets on the way out of the supermarket. When the local primary school was looking for some people to help hear children read Jo was the first to respond. In fact they do all they can to help people. You see Jo has recently retired and has a bit more time available – and the garden is now getting the care it deserves and they do love an evening watching the television.

But Jo is worried.

You see Jo's next-door neighbour and best friend Pat (could be Patrick or Patricia) goes to church. Money is quite tight for Pat having also just retired but never had a company pension scheme to contribute to. But despite all that Jo always thinks Pat is really content, and Jo is, to be perfectly honest, quite jealous of that. When Jo asked Pat about this Pat simply said that it was down to God really. No we don't have much money said Pat, but we do the best with what we've got, and we spend as much time as we can doing God's work with the church. And Jo listened, and Jo wondered.

James says, "But someone will say, You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith." But despite the good works, Jo has no faith.

So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

And what about you and me. How does the James passage we have heard this week affect us?

So to those extracts I read at the start of this sermon.

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt-offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.'

Abraham was told that he was going to father a nation, but his wife had no children and was getting old. And Abraham had to believe. And Abraham made and God forgave him. And when his elderly wife Sarah finally gave him the son he craved, Isaac, God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac – how can that make sense, but Abraham believed, and did what was required. And God stopped him. But what faith. How does our faith compare to Abraham's? If we think God is telling us to do something, however unreasonable, is our faith strong enough?

So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.

Can you imagine what it must have been like to have been one of Jesus' disciples. To drop everything and follow him. To leave your family, and your job, behind, and just go. What an amazing sacrifice – and just on the simple command, "Follow Me." And then you were expected to understand all of Jesus' teaching. And when Jesus told you to go and get a donkey and a colt and bring it to him, you just had to go and do it, and expect the owner to say, "Yeah, that's fine." You had to have total faith in Jesus. You had to do exactly what he said. Are we prepared to do what the disciples did? When we think God is calling us to do something which we fear will make us look a bit silly, will we? Will we drop everything, and do what God calls us to do?

So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

In baptism, God calls us out of darkness into his marvellous light. To follow Christ means dying to sin and raising to new life with him.

And in the baptism service this is all recognised. A life with Jesus is a new life. It is a life of worship, of prayer, of learning, and of works, of doing those things that God calls us to do. We come to faith through the grace of God. That's what Paul teaches us. When we have come to faith we do the works that God expects of us.

That – is what James teaches. What he taught Amy Carmichael. What he taught Justin Welby. What we must pass on to Jo Public. And what we must put into practice ourselves. Amen.