

# Practical wisdom in James

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 1 October 2024

A Reflection by Warren Talbot

Creation 5

James 5: 13-20, and various other verses from James

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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I first read the Book of James in 1972 - at the tender age of... I'll let you guess that one. With parents who were both trade union shop stewards and socialists, I already had an emerging teenage social conscience. But there was not much connection between that, and what I was hearing in my local church every Sunday.

The Book of James became a link between my emerging understanding of faith and an also emerging commitment to the poor and disadvantaged, summarised as social justice, though that is not a term the writer of James uses.

On the basics of authorship, readers, and timing, my broad conclusions are that the author is not the brother of Jesus but an unknown Greek educated follower. The readers were dispersed Jewish Christian communities in the latter part of the first century CE. On those matters there will be references on our website.

James – the book - had a difficult 300 hundred year time getting into the canon of the Christian scriptures – and a somewhat difficult time of staying there. But I am very pleased that this short letter remains – even if we only hear it once every three years. For that and other reasons, the methodology of this Reflection is somewhat more text-based than usual.

It may be helpful to think of the Greek educated James as a writer of wisdom. We might even say philosopher. Unlike Paul, there is no attention to systematic theology as in Romans, and no response to specific local church questions, as in Corinthians or, say, 1 Thessalonians. Jesus is mentioned twice, and then only in passing. In certain ways, the letter of James to dispersed early Christ communities embodies what Aristotle described as practical wisdom.

I'm going to mention three examples of James' practical wisdom, balanced with three caveats or cautions in following the wisdom. And – if that's not enough – a few moments of speculation as to what James' practical wisdom might mean in terms of our action on climate change.

In each case I am using the text from the New Revised Standard Version – which is the Uniting Church's recommended translation for Scripture studies.

The first practical wisdom is: ***“Be doers of the word, not merely hearers”***. (James 1: 22.)

This text is often regarded as a summary of the entire epistle, and rightly so. Whatever the message, hearing is incomplete unless it is acknowledged and expressed in our actions. For James, this principle particularly applies to how we treat those who are without clothing or food (the poor), concluding with the well-known words that “*faith, by itself, if it has no works, is dead*” (James 2: 17).

I wonder how many of us have used the one liner that someone might “*talk the talk, but not walk the walk*”? As true as it may be, it leads to my first caveat or caution.

We never know the full circumstances of another person’s life. It might be best to take James’ practical wisdom as a guide for our own lives, and refrain from too many judgements about others. Easier said than done.

The second set of words of practical wisdom are in the third chapter: “**How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire. And the tongue is a fire.**” (James 3: 5-6).

The passage in which this practical wisdom appears is about taming the tongue, noting that “*all of us make many mistakes*” (James 3:2). (More listening... and less talking).

Language has a function in each of the three words of wisdom. James’ critique of the rich is certainly about our failed actions, but also about our words. That is, what we say to the rich person compared to what we say to the poor person.

The caution is that there are times when we need to speak up in the face of injustice. Perhaps the best way of doing that is in community, not acting as individuals. But even that is sometimes not possible.

I’ve chosen the third words of wisdom from the fifth chapter which Kate read this morning. “*Are there any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.*” (James 5: 13).

James closes their short letter to other Greek-speaking Jewish Christians, with references to activities which might be thought of as being narrowly “religious” – prayer, singing hymns, anointing with oil, and confession of sin. I wondered whether to include them or not.

But making some allowance for language and practice, across the span of 20 centuries, are these not what we might call spiritual practices in the deepest sense? In a certain way, they de-centre the individual ego. If we are the centre of the universe, there’s no real need to pray, sing hymns, anoint, or confess the Loving and Gracious Reality some of us name as...God.

In the same way, we find space in our own lives to not tell the person wearing rags to just sit on the floor, *only when* we have stepped aside from centre stage – and when we are willing to join people... sitting on the floor. In the messiness of all of our lives.

James’ words of wisdom are:

1. Be doers, not only hearers.
2. Beware of the tongue.
3. Pray, sing, anoint, and confess.

In conclusion, I offer brief thoughts, about the ways in which we might move from words written to dispersed early Christ communities, to responding to climate change in the twenty-first century. I'm doing this using ARRCC – the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change – as a lens.

The first practical wisdom is the most obvious. ARRCC is an active “response” to climate change – not only thinking or talking, but acting. This is seen in the range of submissions, letters, banners, public actions and protests we and other ARRCC members join do together.

But I want to suggest that the most obvious link is also the most dangerous. The second practical wisdom – beware of the tongue – is a warning in our words about climate action. The easiest thing in the world to do is to tell other people – especially governments, corporates and big banks – what they should be doing without taking action ourselves.

This is why ARRCC promotes “Living the Change” – changing our use of energy; our consumption of food; and our means of transport.

In terms of the third practical wisdom, ARRCC is the Australian religious response to climate change, where people of different faiths and spiritualities join together. At the ARRCC national conference next weekend there will be plenty of content, strategy, planning and organising. There will also be space for prayer, meditation, contemplation and reflection on Wisdom texts.

In reflecting on the Letter of James,  
we cross the centuries,  
hoping that we may hear the love of God-in-Christ  
for the entire creation,  
listening, learning, and praying together,  
as doers of the Word.  
Amen.

## References

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