

James 2:1-10,14-17**Live out your faith**

Preached at the confirmation service of Sienna Noack at St Michael's Peep Hill

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we will witness Sienna confirm her faith. We will hear her confess the Christian faith in the words of the Apostles' Creed and her own personal statement of faith. And in the rite of confirmation, one of the questions I will ask basically says do you intend to remain faithful to the teachings of the church? This is not just asking if you intend to keep believing what you've been taught. This question is really asking if you intend to live your life in accordance with these teachings.

Confessing the Christian faith in a public setting is a great thing. But living the Christian faith every moment of your life is the goal. That's the point made in our second reading for today from the book of James. The author is concerned about an understanding of the Christian faith that is too small. We reduce the faith to a brief series of statements that people claim to believe. But for James, faith is what underlies how you live your life. People act on the basis of what they believe to be true. And so, if you say one thing but do something else, this passage from James chapter two would say that your real faith is what lies behind your actual actions.

The question, then, is whether the faith that actually shapes our lives is faith in Jesus Christ, or indeed something else entirely. The faith that we might profess on a Sunday morning could be too small to have any impact on the rest of our life. And James is deeply concerned that that may be the case. To give a practical example of this struggle, he turns to issues of social hierarchy. Here in Australia, we sometimes like to think that we are a very egalitarian society. That we don't really have classes within society.

But how often do we actually encounter people who are quite different to us? Our networks of friendships often run along the lines created by income levels and education levels, even without us realising it. But we do live in a quite socially diverse society, and the example given here in James could very well happen in a church here in modern-day Australia.

Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

What's happening here is that we assume to rich well-dressed man is morally better than the poor man in filthy old clothes. We all do this, and yet we also know that we have no ability to see inside someone's heart and judge their standing before God. And James doesn't just say that we're wrong to make such an assumption about their moral status, but that we are evil in doing so. That is a pretty harsh condemnation. We are evil for assuming someone's righteousness based purely on their outward appearance.

Our faith confesses that all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory, but we assume that a poor looking person has sinned worse than a rich looking person. That sort of faith is much too small. If God has said in his word that no one is righteous, and that stumbling at just one point of God's law makes you guilty of breaking all of it, then that is what we should believe. A bold faith will confess that both men are equally sinful and equally in need of a saviour. By challenging the idea that moral character can be tied in to social class, James does his best to mess up any assumption that wealthy is good and poor is bad. The goal is not to just flip that around and make poverty a virtue, but rather, to use God's standards for deciding right from wrong, righteous from sinful.

Then we get re-focused. "If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbour as yourself,' you are doing right." There is nothing remarkable in this. The gospels and the letters of St Paul lift up the centrality of this same command to love our neighbours as ourselves. If we profess to have faith in Jesus, then this is what we will do. Reading the book of James can be quite uncomfortable because James makes the simple observation that if you really believe in Jesus, you presumably believe that the commandment to love one's neighbour is important. And if you believe that, then why would you ever act differently because that neighbour is richer than you or poorer than you?

It takes great faith to believe that someone who is successful in the eyes of the world still doesn't measure up to God's standard. It also takes great faith to believe that someone who has hit rock bottom and has nothing of value left in their life, is just as sinful as you or I. James wants us to have a faith that is strong enough to believe all that God says. But if faith is reduced to just saying a few words like "I believe" then the expression of our faith can be reduced to a few words like telling a homeless person, "Have a nice day." Or as James puts it:

Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?

Those of you, who, like Sienna, have done your confirmation lessons and learnt from Luther's Small Catechism, might be wondering where the gospel is in all this. After all, we are saved by grace and not by our own good works. Yet, the passage from James is unrelenting in the way it goes after the question of what it means to live as a person of God, and it does not let you off the hook.

For James, faith begins with the Word of God that gives us new life, and as we live out that new life that Word extends life to others. Faith is what is active in a person's life, actively giving life to you and to those around you. The question addressed here is not just, "Where is the good news of the gospel?" The question as James puts it is, "Where is the good news of the gospel for your neighbour?" And the answer is you. As you live out the faith you believe and confess, your neighbour sees the gospel, hears the gospel, receives the gospel in their life through you.

This is what James is most concerned about here. That the gospel message of forgiveness and reconciliation in Christ Jesus has taken such a hold in your life that your faith is strong and is lived out in every moment of your life. Your faith will be seen to be alive and not dead. And in that way, more people will come to know Jesus. More people will profess their faith in the one who comes to save us. More people will repent of their sin and receive the good news of forgiveness through Jesus Christ. In that, we can rejoice, because the faith professed and lived out bears witness to the giver of faith, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Sinners like you and me find salvation only in Jesus Christ. We stand before God as his holy children washed clean in the blood of Jesus shed for us on the cross, and that has nothing to do without our standing in society. This is the great joy of the faith that we confess. And we pray that the Lord God would grow such strong faith in us that may live it out in every moment of our lives, to his glory, both now and for eternity. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.