

Sermon at St Andrew's, 8.00am on Sunday 25 May 2025

by Rev. Bill Church

EPISTLE OF JAMES

For two weeks running, the first reading has been from the Epistle of James, one of those short books stuck at the back end of the Bible and rather undervalued.

One of the reasons James in particular is undervalued is that Luther did not like it, calling it “an epistle of straw”. And one of the reasons he did not like it is that he thought it undermined and argued against St Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith alone, set out mainly in Romans, by suggesting that you can be saved by “works” (by which Paul and Luther meant not charitable good works but works of religious observance of the regulations of Moses or of Rome).

Over time this has set up a supposed antagonism between Paul and the author of James. We are meant to imagine them in Edwardian times exchanging politely caustic letters in *The Times*, or at least *The Church Times*, or more modernly increasingly vituperative posts on the internet. But that antagonism is really not there. They do not argue against each other, in part because they may well not have been aware of each other’s writings.

And James had a firm faith and Paul was definitely interested in how Christians should behave themselves.

The epistle has long been attributed to James the brother of the Lord (not either of the James who were apostles). If it was written by his hand, it would be early, as James was martyred in AD 61, but it may have been written down later, incorporating his ideas and named in his honour.

James was not a disciple during Jesus’ lifetime but was a witness of the resurrection (as testified by Paul, no less) and a member of the earliest church (as testified by Paul’s companion Luke). After Peter was driven out of Jerusalem

by persecution, James took over as leader of Jerusalem, and thereby of the church as a whole.

He was identified with theologically conservative Jewish Christians but when he presided at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts chapter 15, he gave as his judgement that gentiles could be admitted to the church without first becoming Jews - thus, as it turned out, ensuring the long-term survival and growth of the church.

His epistle is full of good solid everyday advice to believers on how they should behave, all of which remains valid to this day.

To read Paul may mean having a wrestling match with his theology.

To read James is to be confronted about our way of life – which is at least as challenging. James smokes out snobbery, malicious gossip, ignoring the poor, hypocrisy, envy and selfish ambition can any church, can any soul honestly deny these are still a blight on church and society?