

James writes:

...as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favouritism. James 2:1

It would be a brave person who claimed: "I have no favourites." All of us feel more affinity towards some people, and less affinity towards others. Friendship is arguably a form of favouritism; and marriage is perhaps the ultimate exclusive favouritism. Yet there are other expressions of favouritism, of which all of us have at some time probably been on the giving and receiving end, when people are treated unfairly and unjustly because others are given preferential treatment. We can all probably think of instances when others have been preferred over us, and can probably even now recall our feeling of injustice and resentment. The other person so preferred was no better than us; she or he was merely the beneficiary of arbitrary favouritism. More widely, when favouritism becomes institutionalised, it blights whole societies: favouritism in law results in injustice, favouritism in government and business results in cronyism and corruption. Because the church is comprised of fallible people with affinities and loyalties, the church also needs to guard against favouritism. Even an innocent conversation between friends at church can seem, to the outsider, to be a clique that excludes.

James writes to the "twelve tribes scattered among the nations" (1:1) that those who believe in the glorious (*τῆς δόξης*, *tēs doxēs*) Lord Jesus Christ should show no favouritism. The reference here to *glory* is significant, since glory often refers to the splendour and light that is both sign

and effect of the presence of God. Glory is the divine light, whether seen or unseen, that reveals God's presence to a person. That light of glory often has an exposing effect, such as when Isaiah has an overwhelming vision of the Lord and cries out: "Woe is me! I am a man of unclean lips dwelling among a people of unclean lips." (see Isaiah 6:1-5). Or such as when Peter, who having fished all night and caught nothing, in response to Jesus's instruction, puts out into deep water, lets down his nets, makes a catch of fish so great that his crew can hardly haul it in, and says to Jesus: 'Go away from me, Lord, I'm a sinful man.' (Lk. 5:1-11) The divine light of glory exposes Isaiah and Peter, they have nowhere to hide, and so confess their solidarity in sin.

So we may presume that for James, all believers in our glorious Jesus Christ—that is, all those who regularly expose themselves to the searching light of Jesus Christ—should not show favouritism. This is because God does not show favouritism on the basis of appearance or wealth or status but regards all people equally. (see Job 34:19; Ps. 68:5; Dt. 10:18; Amos 2:6-7; Lev. 19:15). God is impartial and just. To affirm that God is impartial and just, however, should not be understood to mean that God is disinterested in humanity. The good news of Jesus Christ reveals that God is *passionate* for the world, God loves the world and therefore God loves every person. More than this: the God revealed in the Old and New Testaments is *compassionate*, with a particular concern for those whose life circumstances are unfavourable: the poor and oppressed. This type of belief in God as just and compassionate seems to be uppermost in James's mind when he ventures an example designed specifically to expose unequal and unjust treatment of persons in the context of a Christian meeting.

James gives an example of honouring a rich person and humiliating a poor person. A man comes into a meeting dressed in fine robes and with a gold ring on his finger and you say to him: 'Sir, come and have the best seat.' Another man comes into the same meeting dressed in ragged clothing and you say to him: 'Go and sit on the floor over there.' (see James 2:2-4). Such behaviour is manifestly unjust, argues James, because in so doing you have discriminated against the poor person in favour of the rich person. In an echo of the beatitudes, James argues that God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith and to inherit his kingdom (Matt. 5:3); so you had better not humiliate them.

Then James begins a new line of argumentation, he asks: is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Is it not the rich who are dragging you into court? Well, surely, that much has not changed. The rich, in the past and still today, have much to lose and will go to great lengths to recover their debts and protect their interests. But James reminds his readers that the royal law of the Scriptures, applicable to rich and poor alike, is: 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. This law may be designated 'royal' because it comes ultimately from God, the King of creation; and was reaffirmed by Jesus in his teaching about the kingdom of God. Those who follow Jesus are citizens of God's kingdom; and I Peter claims that for this reason the Church is a 'royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God' (1 Pet. 2:9). Jesus summarised and concentrated the law of God's kingdom in terms of *love*: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your strength; and you shall love your neighbour as yourself' (see Matt. 22:37-40). The command to love God is a response to the God who first loves us.

The command to love one's neighbour is intensely practical and extends beyond one's own religious or ethnic group, as the parable of the Good Samaritan revealed to such devastating effect (Lk. 10:29-37). The person beaten, robbed and abandoned on the side of the road is one's neighbour who calls forth from us costly and practical care.

The antidote to favouritism, says James, is *mercy* (2:13). If we keep God's law in every respect but fail to show mercy, then we have lost sight of the merciful God who gives the law. And this is why James argues that faith and works—that is, works in the form of acts of mercy—necessarily go together.

James provides another practical example. A Christian comes upon a person who is lacking proper clothing and hungry and says: 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled!' but does not provide any practical help. The Christian's words here are utterly useless because they have not been reflected in actions (2:15-16). James's judgment upon such an expression of Christian faith is harsh: "faith without works is dead" (2:17). And one can understand why James is so harsh, since the hypothetical Christian here has become deadened to any sense of empathy or compassion or mercy for the person in need.

We would probably all agree in principle that our Christian faith needs to find a consistent expression in acts of mercy. However, it is when we try to apply this principle to actual situations that matters become more challenging. What response should we make to the beggar sitting on a busy footpath in central London? We may feel that money given to a homeless charity is better-directed than money given directly to the beggar; but does that mean we can ignore the beggar? When I have the time—and I don't make the time as often as I should—I try to engage beggars in conversation,

since what I have learned is that feelings of loneliness and isolation are often the worst part of being homeless. Sometimes I will give food, occasionally a small amount of money.

I believe what this church is intending to do again this winter in hosting the Together in Barnet Night Shelter one-night-per-week is a constructive way of expressing our Christian Faith in mercy.

But what of the wider issue that is currently uppermost in the news media headlines? I refer to the large-scale migration of persons from the Middle East and Africa to Europe.

In July I was involved in co-leading a study conference in Berlin for European theology and ministry students. On the last day of the conference myself and two other leaders were having a conversation over lunch about what the theme of next year's conference should be, and we agreed that something like: 'The Church's response to Migration' would be an appropriate theme to pursue. But then my two fellow leaders began to have a discussion, which became a passionate argument, about European responses to migration to date. One leader argued that there have to be limits on immigration, since European nations cannot cope with the scale of all those who wish to migrate; while the other argued that if we believe that all people are made in God's image we should treat those fleeing war and persecution with compassion and guard against a knee-jerk fear of foreigners. While the events of migration in Europe have moved on since July—in particular the decision taken by Germany to suspend certain protocols for asylum seekers—I think the respective positions of that argument are still relevant.

Yes, the numbers of immigrants moving into and through Europe are large; but they are *not* unprecedented. Many more migrated before, during, and after the Second World War, at a time when infrastructure, housing, and financial resources were far more fragile than they are now (or, to be more precise, when much larger proportions of GDP were devoted to the war effort).

Outside the Friedrichstraße Train Station in Berlin, there are two sculptures. One is entitled: "Trains to Life"; the other: "Trains to Death". The Trains to Life sculpture commemorates 10 000 children, the *Kindertransport*, who boarded trains in Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, and eventually found their way to England, where they disembarked first at Harwich, and then many met their foster parents at Liverpool Street Station, London. Nicholas Winton was the main British organiser. The transport was funded by private donations and enabled the children to have an opportunity of a new life in the UK and beyond. The Trains to Death sculpture (see photograph below) commemorates 1.5 million Jewish children who perished, along with many more adults, when most were transported by train to Concentration Camps. One cannot but be moved by the tragic horror of children and adults forcibly transported to their premature deaths.

Recently Germany has temporarily suspended the Dublin agreement by agreeing to process the claims of asylum seekers who have entered the EU via another European nation (often Hungary or Italy or Greece). We should not underestimate the effect of Germany's residual shame at its history of transporting its own citizens to their deaths. Nor should we forget that many non-Jewish Germans were themselves forcibly displaced from their homes in Czechoslovakia, Poland

and the French border region during and after the war. This, I believe, makes Germany's present-day merciful response to asylum seekers more comprehensible. The Letter of James challenges all nations—especially those who would claim to have a Christian foundation—to temper their favouritism towards their own nationals with mercy towards the migrant poor.



*Trains to Death, Friedrichstraße Station, Berlin*