As Christians we get so many things wrong don’t we? But some people still look at a church and imagine that it is full of perfect holy Christians who never do anything wrong. But the church isn’t a Community of Perfect People sailing merrily along, a Ship for the Saved. We’re more like a School for Sinners, for people who know how far they fall short, for people who know their need of God. We get things wrong and like any church we need pulling up short. That’s what the letter of James is all about. We heard a section from it today. The writer assumes we know the Jesus story and that we’re already part of a church. So it pulls us up short, and tests our words and actions to see what we really believe.

It’s no good seeing someone in the church hungry or in need, he says, and just saying, ‘Go in peace’. In this country people don’t often come to church starving but they may come lonely, isolated, needing someone to talk to. Do we try and always talk to someone new when we come to church? Or do we just seek out our own familiar friends? People are so often hungry for simple human contact and as a church we can leave them to starve. Faith and Action need to come together.

And what about the first challenge in today’s reading?

‘Brothers and Sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?’ Do you show the rich person the best seats and show the poor visitor the door?

Who are the ones we naturally welcome to church and feel comfortable with? People like ourselves usually. Who are the ones we feel might be better off outside? The writer of James pulls us up short, for every person is a VIP, a treasured child of God in the house of the Lord, whether in fur coat or overalls, push chair or wheelchair, speaking English or Japanese. Everyone here today is a Distinguished Guest. Many years ago I was standing at the back of this church, waiting for a service to start. The small wooden door opened and in came Her Majesty the Queen! If she was to come here today I’m sure she would...
be given a place of honour, because she represents all people in this country, and to
honour her is to honour all. But as a person, as a Christian, she is no different from you
or me or any other person who comes into this place. Today’s scripture reminds us that
we must do away with any sense of one person being more important than another on
grounds of wealth or worldly status. On the contrary, says James, ‘Has God not chosen
the poor in the world to be rich in faith?’

The Gentile woman in our Gospel was commended by Jesus for being rich in faith. She
was poor in other ways, at least in the eyes of the Jewish first century disciples. She was a
woman in a man’s world, and a gentile woman at that. She’d burst into the house where
he was trying to lie low for a while. It’s a very different age, but imagine today, sitting at
home with family and friends, when a Muslim woman in full Burkha comes bursting in…
Called names today by Boris Johnson and worse by others, how might you feel?
Outsiders are easily demonised, seen as not fully human.

As the gentile woman begged for healing for her daughter, Jesus said that it wasn’t fair to
take the children’s bread and feed it to dogs. It’s one of the harshest sayings we hear come
from his lips, and it was a phrase his disciples would be used to. But she is humble and
she is faithful. She replies, ‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’
Perhaps a very human Jesus was pulled up short by the woman’s challenge. Perhaps he
simply wanted to expose what the disciples were thinking. We don’t know. In any case
he couldn’t physically heal the whole world. He had a divine task to fulfil and in his short
lifetime he needed to focus on Israel and his mission to the Jews. But Jesus allows his
focus to been drawn by this stranger, and his heart to be touched by this outsider’s
desperate love and concern for her sick daughter. Whatever lies behind this strange
exchange we know that the woman’s quiet, brave and persistent faith wins through. Her
child is healed.

In matters of faith, all can be royalty. Last week I took my son’s wedding at his church in
London. It was wonderful! We waved him and his wife off on honeymoon without a
backward glance, feeling only joy.

I remember when he first left home though, just 18, he went to live in a poor part of
Kenya. We had almost no contact with him for 6 months and I missed him terribly!
The week he left I went about my work in a bit of a daze, and one day I remember
visiting an old lady in hospital. Muddled in mind and poor in every way: no money, no
privacy, she had no real sense of what was going on. She’d even lost her glasses.
Yet when I prayed with her that day, she took my hands into hers and kissed them. And she started to pray for me. She’d asked after Sam and knew how much he was on my heart. She prayed for him so simply and so beautifully I could have wept.

The letter of James reminds us. Bring faith and action together.

And expect to find God’s beauty and mercy in the most unlikely places.

Amen.