

Faith without favouritism
5 September 2021
High Street Uniting Church Frankston
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Read: James 2: 1-18 (preferably in THE MESSAGE translation)

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. **Amen.***

Today's Bible reading from the letter of James begins with a story. I wonder if you've ever experienced a version of this. It's the story of two people walking into an assembly (in the translation that we read this morning, into a church), and the one wearing fine clothes is escorted to a fine seat, and the one wearing street clothes is escorted to a back seat. Have you ever experienced anything like that?

Chances are that you have, somewhere or other. Maybe even in the church – maybe you've been told "oh, no, that's my seat" or something like that. I hope not. It's reminiscent of Jesus' story of the banquet, in which he advised people NOT to choose the best seat for themselves, lest the host move them to a lower seat; but rather choose a low seat, because the host might come and move you up. This was consistently Jesus' approach to who he sat with, living and expressing the idea that the first will be last, and the last first, in the kingdom of God.

I'm not sure who can be said to have the best seat while we're on zoom (and phones)! I guess we're all on our own seats. And I hope and trust that you do all feel welcome. You are certainly welcome, as we share this time of worship together.

The text that we have before us has two very strong claims in it. Strong claims that affect how we live. The first is that you can't have faith and show favouritism; the second is that you can't have faith and be indifferent to people's needs. Faith calls for an equal welcome of people without reference to a social hierarchy; and at the same time, faith in the God of Jesus can't fail to care when hierarchies are causing hurt.

On the first point, there are three reasons given in James' letter as to why faith and favouritism can't go together.

First of all, consistently throughout the Bible we hear that God has *at least* as much care for the poor as for the rich, and indeed goes out of the way to make sure that provision is always made for them. In Luke's version of the sermon on the mount, the kingdom of heaven is not just for the poor *in spirit* but for the actually poor.

Second of all, James points out that favouring the rich has a habit of back-firing, because the rich start to expect their own way. It certainly sounds like James has had some bad personal experience in the way he writes out that.

Third of all, James suggests that treating the poor as second-class is a failure to follow the law of loving your neighbour; it is a breaking of the law like any other; it's a sin.

So for all of those reasons, our faith demands that we pay attention to providing good welcome for all people, without favouritism.

Last Tuesday night there was an online seminar about being a welcoming church. Being welcoming generally doesn't happen by accident, it takes being intentional. Unfortunately a number of us were involved in another study on the night of the seminar, so I don't think anyone got to it. If you would like to see it, there's a recording of the session that can be found online that I'd be very happy to point you to.

The second main claim in today's reading is that you can't have faith and be indifferent to people's needs. Faith in the God of Jesus is expressed in action for the care of our neighbours, the good of creation, and the glory of God. There are numerous straightforward ways that this might be expressed in local and personal ways: providing food for neighbours and those in need, and donating to good causes for emergency and poverty relief. Faith and care go hand in glove.

Let me pick up a few slightly less straightforward things that have been happening in the church around us recently – even in this lockdown state.

Firstly, there are a number of people involved in study groups about the Statement from the Heart. The Statement from the Heart came out of the unprecedented 2017 gathering at Uluru when Indigenous people from across the nation agreed together on calls for truth-telling, a Makarrata Commission, and a secure Indigenous Voice to parliament. Faith can't be indifferent to the situation of the Indigenous people of Australia, or the way in which the colonisation of Australia involved bringing Christian faith on the one hand, but also bringing a culture possession, land-ownership and the accumulation of wealth and causing massive dispossession in ways that were hardly Christian. We cannot be indifferent to this, and I'm glad that the church is listening seriously.

Secondly, We all grieve for the situation in Afghanistan. I am delighted that one of our newer members has helped to coordinate the children making welcome cards for Afghan refugees in hotel quarantine in Victoria. This is brilliant. I also spoke with someone during the week who is trying to collect sewing machines to give to Afghan women – I'm not quite sure how that's going to work yet, but it's great that there are efforts we might support.

Thirdly, one of the things that I was blown away by at the national Assembly Standing Committee meeting that I went to last weekend was the work of Frontier Services in the provision of Bush Chaplains. From being in a dire position 5 or 6 years ago, they are growing Bush Chaplaincy with 16 Bush Chaplains already, one in fire-affected Gippsland, and they're working up towards 22 by year's end, and providing great advocacy and work for the rural people including the people of Western New South Wales. Of course, when we talk about community chaplaincy we also have a whole lot of people involved with the Victorian Council of Churches Emergency Ministries, which is a fantastic and effective expression of faith and care.

The last area that I want to mention has as tricky edge. I was in quite a discussion with some colleagues earlier this week and the path is still not entirely clear.

For those who are prepared to accept the advice of the Therapeutic Goods Administration and the ATAGI, getting vaccinated is a clear way of helping the whole community to suppress the worst ravages of the COVID virus, and to protect those who are unable to be vaccinated. In its own way, it is an act of care for our neighbours.

The trickiness arises when the question of a vaccine passport comes into play. Does requiring a vaccine passport amount to the showing of favouritism? Would a church ever require a vaccine passport? Would we require it even if the government mandated it?

In my discussion with my colleagues, we talked about how if someone came to church with a weapon, we would not let them in. There is a limit to our welcome when safety is threatened. In the same way, if someone came to the church showing symptoms of COVID, we would sadly turn them away, making clear that during the time of being ill there are other ways to join in worship and to access the care of the church, but gathering in a group while sick is not OK. It gets a little more borderline when it comes to mask mandates, but basically a similar line seems appropriate: we will be wearing masks for each other's safety for a while yet.

Vaccinations, though, are probably different. While I trust the TGA and ATAGI experts and their statistics, and thoroughly recommend vaccinations unless there's a specific medical reason, I think we'd find a vaccination passport troubling, in the case of the church. It's not the kind of favouritism that James is writing about, and it's not without risk, but it seems too judgemental to block entry to the church to someone unvaccinated. We're not up to considering that fully, yet. More importantly, though, we will need to make sure that we continue to care for people outside of the church's doors regardless of their vaccination status.

It's noticeable that the first part of the reading from James is about favouritism with respect to those who come into the church. What about those who don't? Are we ready to reach out, without favouritism, beyond the church's door?

James's letter makes clear that faith and favouritism can't go together, and that faith can't go with indifference. Even while we are locked down actions of care for those around us are taking place in ways both small and large. As our reading reminds us, faith is seen in our actions and attitudes. As we heard in the Message translation: "We do well when we complete the Royal Rule of the Scriptures, "Love others as you love yourself""

To the glory of God.