The letter of James has had a chequered history. Martin Luther considered it to be “an epistle of straw” as it contained no reference to the passion and resurrection of Christ or reference to the Holy Spirit. The letter was a real late comer to the cannon of scripture not been included until the time of Origen around 235AD and was considered to be a controversial addition to the New Testament.

The writer of this letter is building on the Wisdom tradition in Jewish literature, the letter is full of advice and instruction, this style of Biblical writing known as parenetic literature. The letter was written in a way that would have appealed to a Jewish audience, and some have questioned if it would have even been more suitable to consider it as a Jewish book rather than a Christian book, hence the uncertainty about where it fits in the cannon of scripture, the writer only mentions Jesus twice, but does mention lots of characters from the Hebrew Bible, Abraham, Job, Elijah and even Rahab gets a mention.

The writer of James had a style which has been described as being like a man who has a bag of coloured balls. Each representing a theme. He dips onto a bag takes out a ball and writes about the theme put the ball in the bag and gets out another and keeps doing this, so we end up with a random pattern, where the same themes keep popping up here and there.

It’s a fast-moving letter full of urgency encouraging us to be workers for good. James highlights the inner life, the need for faith and a relationship with God, but also tells us that this faith is not an academic exercise but something that produces generous, radical godly living.

So, let’s dive into this opening section of the letter attributed to James and see where this leads us. What advice can we find in this reading and how can we apply it to our lives!

Firstly, the reading starts on a note of thanksgiving, an exhortation to Praise God, calling to mind his generosity to us, remembering the Blessings we have received, remembering that we are His children, the first fruits of his Kingdom. That we can trust in His eternal continuity and presence with us, but also a hint that as God is generous to us so should we be generous to others.

**Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfilment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.**

Next the writer moves away from the gift of God to consider how we conduct ourselves in the light of God, our response to the gift of God, how we maintain the body of Christ which is the fellowship of all believers.

**You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.**

**If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.**

One of the themes that comes through in this letter is “speech ethics”, the way that our language can be used for good or evil. The writer of James was acutely aware of the Blessings and the damage that our words can inflict on others. Sticks and stone can break your bones, but words, well they can rip the soul out of a person. The expression if you can’t find anything good to say, say nothing really applies here.

I don’t think that we are being told not to be challenging, but we need to be careful how we do this, not to be personal, spiteful, or vindictive but to be considered and to ask ourselves, do I need to say this, if so why, and how do I think it will be received, how would you receive it if spoken to you?

**As we are told in proverbs 18:21 The tongue has the power of life and death,**

**and those who love it will eat its fruit.**

I am sure that we all at times get this badly wrong, but it’s an important message for us to hear and work on. I wonder what the world would look like if everyone thought before they spoke, considered if their comments would build up rather than cause division?

And finally, the writer moves away from personal Holiness within and looks at the out workings of this relationship with God and in doing so opens up a whole can of worms!

James’ notion of justification is often seen to be at odds with St Paul’s writing on justification. In a nutshell Paul taught that we were justified by faith alone, whereas James suggest that faith is not the whole picture and faith needs to be seen in actions to be true faith.

**Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.**

and latter

**James 2:14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?**

For James faith needs to have an outworking to be true faith. Are we justified by faith or works is a bigger question than we have time for here, but one we need to consider?

For what it’s worth I take a more Pauline view, only by Grace can we know the love of God, we don’t earn our salvation, however I do also think that we are also called to be agents of change in the world, Jesus commanded us to feed the hungry, visit the prisoner, proclaim freedom to the captive, this I see as a response to God’s love not an action to earn that love.

For James, being an active agent for change is an essential part of the Christian life, which is true, however we need to form our own opinions on whether this is essential for redemption!

**But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers.**

The writer of James urges us to remember that we are the children of God, the first fruits of His creation and that the way we conduct ourselves should be Holy, and we should treat each other in a way that acknowledges that they are as much part of Christ as we are, but quick to build up, slow to be critical, be generous for God has been generous to you, be loving and quick to forgive as again this reflects the way that God treats you.

We should be people who recognise that through the Grace of God we live in Him and He in us. And as we heard in our Gospel reading, we need to be mindful of what comes from us, our words, our action, as these are the markers of our inner life - do these demonstrate that we are living in love and peace.

In the pew sheet you will find a prayer, written at about the time that James was included in the cannon of scripture, that picks up on the themes shared in the letter of James, I would like to encourage you to take this home and may be use this prayer in the coming weeks to help us focus on living a godly life

May I be no man's enemy, and may I be the friend of that which is eternal and abides.

May I never quarrel with those nearest me: and if I do, may I be reconciled quickly.

May I love, seek, and attain only that which is good.

May I desire for all men's happiness and envy none.

May I never rejoice in the ill-fortune of one who has wronged me.

When I have done or said what is wrong, may I never wait for the rebuke of others, but always rebuke myself until I make amends.

May I win no victory that harms either me or my opponent.

May I reconcile friends who are angry with one another.

May I never fail a friend who is in danger.

When visiting those in grief may I be able by gentle and healing with words to soften their pain.

May I respect myself.

May I always keep tame that which rages within me.

May I accustom myself to be gentle, and never be angry with people because of circumstances.

May I never discuss who is wicked and what wicked things he has done but know good men and follow in their footsteps.

**Eusebius, a 3rd century church father**