

**READINGS: James 2:1-10,14-17; Mark 7:24-37; Isaiah 35:4-7a**

In our Gospel passage for today, we read about two encounters that Jesus had with people who would have been considered outsiders or rejects in his culture, the Syro-Phoenician woman and a deaf and mute boy. Jesus demonstrates here his unconditional love for people and reaches out to them in their need. These are characteristics that we consistently see in God's concern for the poor and needy reflected in many passages throughout the Old Testament – for example, the passage from the prophecy of Isaiah we read earlier – here's how the Message translation puts it: “Courage! Take heart! God is here, right here, on his way to put things right and redress all wrongs. He's on his way! He'll save you!” Blind eyes will be opened, deaf ears unstopped, lame men and women will leap like deer, the voiceless break into song. Springs of water will burst out in the wilderness, streams flow in the desert. Hot sands will become a cool oasis, thirsty ground a splashing fountain.’

So you won't find God favouring and flattering the rich, powerful and influential. He operates quite differently. To be sure, God does love and care for all people, rich and poor, weak and powerful, but God especially redresses the balance by caring for those that no one else cares for. As the late David Shepherd, former bishop of Liverpool, put it: God has a bias for the poor and marginalised. For God has absolutely no favourites.

In the passage we read earlier from the letter James wrote, we find James challenging the church and us today to express this same kind of unconditional love and to show no favouritism in the way that we treat different people. He gives us a practical example: imagine two people come into our Open Door Church, one dressed in designer clothes and stinking rich and the other in shabby clothes, stinking of poverty – how would we treat them? He challenges us that if we discriminate on the basis of appearance or wealth we are passing judgement on another person and not expressing the unconditional love of God.

James says that we need to have God's perspective on the poor – God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith and inherit the kingdom. He challenges them against insulting the poor when in fact it's the rich who are exploiting them, dragging them into court and slandering Christ. And the fat cats of today are no different – they are undoubtedly exploiting us, but in developing nations they not only exploit the poor but use the courts to rob them blind – and in both cases they slander and scorn Christ.

James brings us back to first principles; we are to love our neighbour as ourselves. There is no room for favouritism, no room for discrimination on any basis, only talking to some folk or not sitting beside others – for favouritism and discrimination break the law of Christ who calls us to love and accept one another as we have been loved and accepted by him. God has no favourites, and we are called to have none either.

Again, let me read to you how the Message translation put it: ‘My dear friends, don’t let public opinion influence how you live out our glorious, Christ-originated faith. If a man enters your church wearing an expensive suit, and a street person wearing rags comes in right after him, and you say to the man in the suit, “Sit here, sir; this is the best seat in the house!” and either ignore the street person or say, “Better sit here in the back row,” haven’t you segregated God’s children and proved that you are judges who can’t be trusted?’

Listen, dear friends. Isn’t it clear by now that God operates quite differently? He chose the world’s down-and-outs as the kingdom’s first citizens, with full rights and privileges. This kingdom is promised to anyone who loves God. And here you are abusing these same citizens! Isn’t it the high and mighty who exploit you, who use the courts to rob you blind? Aren’t they the ones who scorn the new name – “Christian” – used in your baptisms?

You do well when you complete the Royal Rule of the Scriptures: “Love others as you love yourself.” But if you play up to these so-called important people, you go against the Rule and stand convicted by it. You can’t pick and choose in these things, specializing in keeping one or two things in God’s law and ignoring others.’

In the rest of our reading from James, we find James reiterating the importance of what we discovered last week, that faith must work itself out in action. If someone is cold and hungry and we only offer pious platitudes it’s worthless – we must do something. He is as blunt as to say that faith without deeds is useless and dead. God-talk without God-deeds is outrageous nonsense!