

We resume the series on James. In the service we also read Psalm 146, 10:17-18, 68:5 and 82:3-4, and Isaiah 1:17. We only need one half verse from James in addition.

We also watched a clip about Martin of Tours, the later St Martin, who shared half his cloak with a cold beggar. It is at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ZKOe8dorEY> from 1:13 to 4:25.

1. It seems that the world has never changed faster than now. Yet what always remains the same is that some people have and some people don't have. Some have not enough and others, well, frankly, more than they need.

2. James tells us that proper religion is looking after orphans and widows. We need to understand the situation in which he writes this. There was no welfare state then, no social security, no pensions. People mainly had their family to fall back on. But conversion to Christianity often meant that your family disowned you. Jews who became Christians were no longer accepted by other Jews; gentiles who followed Jesus were often rejected by their relatives as well. As if they were death. So the vulnerable among them were no longer cared for.

Yet new believers got something in return: a new family, the church. (Did you know that God is only really seen as Father in Christianity?) In this way the church became responsible for the welfare of its members, in a very practical way.

3. The Old Testament set them the example: there was supposed to be no poverty in Israel; the laws of Moses contained many provisions for the poor, and the Psalms and the prophets often specifically mention the care for widows and orphans.

Jesus also said much about this subject.

The early Christians acted accordingly: in Acts 6 we see that there was care for the widows in the first church (although some were overlooked because they spoke a different language.). Paul later took up a collection for the church in Jerusalem.

4. In our time people come up with many reasons not to help:

- 'Someone is a foreigner or a refugee'
- 'Someone has a different religion' (This seems to be particularly strong in Northern Ireland)
- 'Someone has wasted their life, they did not work hard enough, they messed up themselves'
- 'My neighbour is noisy, smelly, awkward. My neighbour does not qualify for my help.'

It is obvious that none of these reasons is valid – I would be happy to explain why not.

So we are called to look after the needy in our society and especially in the church (which is not the same as looking down on them). See Galatians 6:10: 'Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.'

5. What does this mean in practice?

- We should not merely act in a sentimental way; we are allowed, we are supposed to think clearly; for example:
  - Today widows are not generally in trouble because there are pensions; even the word 'widow' is 'out'.

- James uses the words 'in their distress'; this suggests that only people who actually face adversity are meant
  - We should beware of deceivers (and spam): some people present as needy but are not. (One of us recently gave £50 to a cheat.)
- If we can, we should give a net rather than a fish to those who can handle it. In that way they can later help themselves.
- In our society I think the real homeless, orphans, refugees and (in other countries) persecuted believers need our help most.
- As Jesus fed groups of 4000 and 5000 people, so on his behalf we look after people.