

# Leavening Church

## Thought for Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> March (Bible Study Group)

In our bible study group this week we looked at James 2: 14-26; here are the first few verses.

*<sup>14</sup> What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? <sup>15</sup> Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. <sup>16</sup> If one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? <sup>17</sup> In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.*

One of the pleasures we have found in reading James is the understandable way in which he conveys his message, with none of the complexity of St. Paul's letters. Here he gives a simple example to illustrate his thinking on the relationship between Christian faith and actions; if we see someone in need and wish them well, but make no effort to give them practical help, that is no use. For James Christian faith has to be linked to action.

This thinking has led some, including Martin Luther, to see the letter as being at variance with the idea of salvation by faith. At the time of the reformation there was particular concern about this, because the reformers were reacting against the excesses of the mediaeval church with its complex system of 'indulgences' rewarding good works. Instead some of the early reformers swung to the other extreme and placed all the emphasis on faith to the point where they under-estimated the importance of works. James, by contrast, emphasises that faith and works are inextricably linked; real faith will inevitably lead to doing good works.

The passage ends with James giving a couple of examples of the combination of faith and works from the Old Testament. The first example is the predictable one of Abraham and Isaac, but the second is less obvious – it is Rahab the prostitute, who played a vital role in the Israelite's conquest of the promised land. For those of you who have forgotten the story (see [Joshua 2](#)), Joshua sent two spies into Jericho who stayed at Rahab's house, but the king of Jericho learns they are there. Rahab hides the spies on her roof and tells the soldiers that they left before the city gates shut for the night, thus causing the soldiers to leave her house and set off on a fruitless pursuit of the spies. Later she lets the men down out of the city through a window in the walls, but only after extracting a promise of safety for her family once the Israelites capture the city.

Given the current focus in the media on women's rights at present, it is appropriate that Rahab is such a strong female character. Unlike so many women in the old testament she is not just a bit part in this story, she is very much the lead character. As James suggests, she demonstrates both faith and works in the story, and hers is the type of faith that does not just lead to pious prayer but motivates her to dynamic action, which would have cost her life had the king discovered her plot.

So let us remember the example of Rahab and let our faith lead us into action; we may not be able to match her daring deeds, but perhaps by challenging ourselves we can do something that will make a real difference to the world around us.