

“It was those who are poor according to the world that God chooses... to be heirs of the Kingdom” writes James in our second reading. It is difficult to think of people who are poorer than those who have been forced from their homes and who have trekked across a continent, unsure of where food or shelter or any hospitality will come; and whose children's bodies are washed ashore, lifeless.

The Letter of James combines clear pastoral instruction with a no-nonsense verbal directness. In today's passage he criticises behaviour which he must have seen in his community. Individuals are treated in accord with their perceived status which is judged by their appearance. The person of poverty who comes in shabby clothes, unkempt, looking down on their luck is treated in one way; while the person who appears affluent, well-fed and well resourced is treated in a very different way.

James does not hold back. Acting in this way makes you judges of people (something the Lord explicitly warned against – “Judge not lest you yourselves be judged”[Lk.6,37]) but even worse you make yourselves corrupt judges. Something else the Lord warned against in his parable of the widow and the corrupt judge who had neither fear of God nor of men (Lk 18, 1-6). This is not company those of the early Church of James would want to be associated with. Corrupt judges were endemic at this time and many in the community would have suffered at their hands.

James could also point to examples from the Scriptures to emphasise the error in such an approach to visitors. Perhaps he expects his community to be able to work it out for themselves. We have less familiarity with the Bible, so perhaps we need a little nudge.

Back in the Garden of Eden, when Eve is tempted by the serpent, the wiliest of God's creatures she looks at the fruit and sees it is beautiful to behold, and what harm can come from something so pretty? Exile from the Garden of Paradise because of disobedience caused by appearances being valued over the Word of God. (Gen, 3,6)

King David was the greatest of the Kings of Israel, anointed by the error-prone prophet Samuel who had gone to Bethlehem at God's command to meet the sons of Jesse. He is introduced to the eldest, Eliab, who is a fine young man, tall and handsome. Samuel is set to anoint him when God intervenes with the message, “Man looks at the outward appearance but I look at the heart”. (1 Sam 16, 7)

It is a lesson David himself failed to learn. Staying in his palace to have long siestas while his army is in the field fighting his battles he is enticed by the bathing Bathsheba who is very beautiful (2Sam 11,2d). David succumbs and his life unravels as his family falls apart to death and destruction.

Appearances deceive. They are not a secure basis for sound judgement.

James' example has a very contemporary feel to it. His instructions are to his own community. We might wonder what counsel would he give to the European community about the hundreds of thousands of refugees seeking protection from the murderous regime of their own nation which has bombed its own people with vicious cluster bombs and chemical devices. These are desperate people who have endured hardship and heartache beyond anything most of us can imagine. They did not want to have to relocate into an alien environment. Many will want to return when circumstances allow. It cannot be beyond the wit of the authorities to distinguish between victims of horror who are fleeing evil at risk of their lives and those who are chancing their arm in the hope of something better than what they have at home.

It is not difficult to imagine what James would say; and his choice of expression would no doubt be colourful. He would welcome the government's announcement that thousands of Syrian refugees will be welcomed into the UK, but more needs to be done and coordination must be effected and effective across the world or many more bodies of infants will wash up on the shores of Europe.