

Perfect gifts that are the stock in trade of St John's Youth Services

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Pentecost + 14 – James 1 17-27 Mark 7 1-8 14-23

At last week's meeting of the local ministers' association, I sat down with three of my Lutheran colleagues to discuss the scriptures that were to come up today. We share the same lectionary with them and with many other churches. Seeing as the Letter of St James was among these readings, I rudely asked them if the Lutherans were okay with James these days. One of the best known facts about the Letter of St James is that Martin Luther really didn't think it should be included in the Bible.

Luther was a great supporter of St Paul's teaching that we are saved *by faith alone*. Paul says we can't be saved by doing good works or earning merit, but rather – *God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.*

Rom 5.8 Luther read that to mean that the Pope was teaching the wrong thing back then; all those indulgences – buying Rome's merit to earn salvation. For Paul, Jesus died for us even though we don't deserve it; even though we don't have lots of stars beside our names in God's little black book. By God's grace, salvation is an unearned gift.

So when Luther read in James *faith without works is dead* ^{2.26} he called it Popish; he saw it as directly opposed Paul's teaching, so it should be left out. Anyway, you'll be pleased to know that my Lutheran colleagues assured me they're okay with James these days. And part of the reason why is in the first verse we read from his letter today; *Every generous act*

of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above.

What that means is that people's good works and kindness are also God's gift to us; they're the Holy Spirit's gift *through* us. The Holy Spirit inspires gifts of generosity and compassion in people. James builds on this; he teaches Christians about daily life. He calls us to be responsible, taking seriously our emotional lives, our religious faith, and our behavior. For James, we can even see ourselves as early signs of God's new creation. But there's something else very interesting in this verse. **Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above.** The Letter of James doesn't confine itself to the generous acts and perfect gifts of people who profess a faith in God; it says **every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above.**

James actually sounds a lot like Paul to me here. Just as Paul teaches that God doesn't wait for us to earn salvation before offering it to us, James teaches that God's grace doesn't wait for us have a faith, or to earn a gift of generosity or kindness before we find those gifts at work in our lives. They're gifts we see being used everywhere, not just among people of religion, but anywhere they're needed. **Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above.**

Some people seem uncomfortable with the notion of God being involved in their kindness and generosity. But they seem happy to say the Universe has somehow had a hand in it, and I'm sure God's okay with that. Anyway, today, I'm delighted that we have the letter of St James in front of us with its focus on generous social justice. Because today, I want to celebrate the generous acts of giving – *perfect gifts* – that are the stock in trade of St John's Youth Services.

Every month, I look forward to the stories in the CEO's report to the board; stories of case workers going a huge extra distance; of young people receiving a new start in life they'd

never imagined possible; lives characterised by security, possibility, safety, hope, confidence, joy; things we want for all young people. After their encounter with SJYS, almost none of these young people ever need to come back there for more support. They've been launched, carrying that love and commitment within them. **Every** generous act of giving, with **every** perfect gift, is from above.

Because of SJYS, over the past three decades, more than 15,000 of SA's street kids have experienced *perfect gifts*; gifts of compassion, respect and dedication. They've experienced the most sincere belief in them; belief in their value, their ability and their potential. They've been championed by the most skilled, united team of tenacious advocates walking alongside them that I can think of anywhere. In my language, they've experienced God's love for them. The SJYS team has a collective sense of family and purpose, there's an atmosphere of compassion and commitment that seems to be the air these people breathe. Perfect gifts for the job. Today as Wendy retires after 28 years as CEO, we give thanks for all this.

Amen.