Who is wise and understanding among you, asks James! I wonder, if I asked you the question now, how many of you would raise your hand! Don’t worry – I’m not going to.

I love the letter of James. It is so full of practical wisdom – or *phronesis*, to give you its Greek name. *Phronesis* isn’t the kind of wisdom that a philosopher in a lofty university would talk about – arguing for or against something with long sentences and complicated words. *Phronesis* – practical wisdom – is about how we should live.

And in particular, James is concerned with how the church should live together as a community. It’s our practical handbook, if you like, of what our relationships with each other should be.

There are a number of Jameses mentioned in the Gospels – two of Jesus’ disciples were called James, and he also had a brother called James. Scholars debate about who wrote the letter of James – the balance of probabilities says it was Jesus’ brother, but that’s by no means certain.

The letter is written to an audience of Jewish Christians, and one of its key aspects is that the author continues to maintain the importance of keeping the Jewish law – in one of his most famous verses, he states that ‘faith without works is dead’.

That is, that if you claim to be a Christian, but if it doesn’t show in the way you live, James would question whether you really have a living faith. On the flip side – if you are a Christian, we might expect to see that lived out in the way you behave.

And in our reading today, we see that James says that there are two sorts of wisdom. One is the wisdom that comes from God, which we see in the way we live good lives with gentleness. But there is also what he calls a wisdom which comes from the devil, which focuses on envy and ambition. I’m reminded of the Sorting Hat in Harry Potter.

If you’ve never read it, Harry Potter goes to school at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. And at Hogwarts the students are divided into four houses – Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and Slytherin.

Each house has particular characteristics, and the students are divided into their houses, according to their own qualities, by the Sorting Hat – a talking hat who has his own song. And about Slytherin he sings

‘Perhaps in Slytherin

you’ll make your real friends.

Those cunning folk use any means

to achieve their ends.’

This is the kind of wisdom that James is talking about which focuses on envy and ambition – as he says, where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. Just as you don’t want to be sorted into Slytherin house, nor do you want to have that kind of envious and selfish wisdom, which leads to disorder and wickedness.

And that isn’t the sort of behaviour that James is expecting to see among his Christian congregations. In fact, he’s clearly alarmed at the conflict which he’s seeing among the people he’s writing to. And I wonder if you noted how he traces the cause of that conflict back to their failure to keep the 10 commandments.

They have cravings at war within themselves, he says. And because of this, they commit murder, or they covet. They dispute and are in conflict with each other because they want what each other has.

When they ask for something, they ask wrongly, because they are asking for things for their pleasure, rather than because they actually need it. In a part of the passage which wasn’t included in our reading this morning, he accuses them of being adulterers.

They are, in short, making a total mess of their lives, because they are not concentrating on how to be friends with God!

While I was on holiday I read this book – Sabbath as Resistance, by the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann. His argument is that the culture of the modern world is so much about speed, and work, and worry, and acquiring things, that we have forgotten how to take Sabbath rest, as God did.

And therefore, that taking Sabbath rest – taking time to step back from the world and to say – not now – is a radical and revolutionary thing to do.

And for Brueggemann, failing to keep the 10th commandment, thou shalt not covet, is one of the key ways that we destroy our communities, by never taking the time to slow down and say – I’ve got enough. Now I’m going to rest, and I’m going to enable all those who are in community with me to rest too.

As he says, “Sabbath is the cessation of widely shared practices of acquisitiveness. It provides time, space, energy and imagination for coming to the ultimate recognition that more commodities – more things – do not satisfy.”

The important thing is that we learn to live by the gift of God, not by relying on ourselves, or by getting more stuff. Sabbath is not simply about keeping rules, but about becoming a whole person and restoring a whole society.

And this goes back to that *phronesis*, that practical wisdom of how to live good lives in our Christian communities. Submit to God. Resist the devil, draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.

It’s interesting that we can draw the same point out of the Gospel reading today. The disciples, too, have got distracted by their ambition, their desire to have more. For them, it’s about the desire to be considered the greatest disciple.

And Jesus refocuses their attention on what it should be. We should not be desiring to be the greatest, we should not desire to acquire high position – we should be aiming to serve each other.

And we should be willing to spend time welcoming and encouraging and supporting those who are seen as least in our society – Jesus uses the example of children, but we could just as easily talk about welcoming refugees, or people who are disabled , or those who have mental health difficulties, or those who are vulnerable – and putting their needs above our own desires.

So what does this mean for us today? We are 2000 years and just as many miles from the Jewish Christians that James was writing to. But I think his point is just as relevant to us today.

First of all, we need to take time to reflect. Do you ever sit back for a few minutes and ask – how am I doing today? Am I consciously trying to live by that practical wisdom that James is talking about?

Am I consciously trying to live with gentleness – or am I allowing envy and ambition to find a place in my heart?

Am I trying to put myself and what I want first? Or am I marking Jesus’ words, and being willing to serve others, and putting the needs of others first, especially those who are often overlooked or despised?

Second, we need to be ready to change the way we live. Open our hearts to a new kind of hospitality and generosity where we’re ready and willing to put others first. To look around us and say – who here is the most excluded, the most vulnerable, the most despised. How can I help and support them?

And this is a thing that we constantly need to work on. To be ready to say, every morning – Lord Jesus, help me to be more like you today, more like the person you want me to be.

And third, we need to be ready to take time. To remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. To copy God in taking rest in our lives – rest from labour, rest from excessive busyness, and rest from accumulating more and more stuff. That we may come to know a rest which is rooted in God’s own restfulness, and which is extended from ourselves to our neighbours, who must also rest.

And so let’s pray now.

Lord Jesus, thank you for these words of James, that challenge us afresh as we hear them today. Please help us to live according to this practical wisdom. Please help us to live in harmony with each other, caring about each other’s needs and putting them before our own.

Please help us to have the courage to admit when we get it wrong, and the perseverance to try again. And please help us to rest – to rest back from our own desire to accumulate things, and to rest in the certainty of your good provision for us. Amen.