

Readings: Deuteronomy 4:1,2, 6 – 8; Ps. 14 (15); James 1: 17, 18, 22 – 27; Mark 7: 1 – 8, 14, 15, 21 – 23.

Today we start reading another book for our second reading at mass. It's another 'epistle' – but it's rather different from most of the others. In the first place it's not addressed to a particular Church or individual. It's one of a group which are sometimes called General, or Catholic, Epistles, because they are addressed to Christians in general. And in the second place it isn't really a letter, dealing with particular issues of doctrine, church order or Christian conduct – it's more like a sermon on Christian conduct – or perhaps even a manual of instruction on the way of life required of new Christians.

The book begins *James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ: To the Twelve Tribes in the Dispersion: Greeting.*

Tradition has identified this 'James' as one of the Twelve Apostles, not the brother of John, but the son of Alphaeus – usually called 'James the Less'. This is unlikely, but the book may have been written by – or based on writings by – James of Jerusalem. He's called 'the brother of the Lord' and was a leading figure in the early years of the Church. In Acts chapter 15 we read about him presiding over the Council of Jerusalem, which tried to avoid the threatened breach between Jewish and gentile Christians over the observance of the Law of Moses. He was martyred in AD 62, and so – if he was the author – the letter (or its sources) must date from before that time.

The fact that the book is addressed to *the Twelve Tribes in the Dispersion* suggests that it may have been written to Jewish Christians to show how the Old Testament Law – modified where needed – should be applied to their lives as Christians.

The main theme of today's passage seems to be the certainty of the teaching which comes from the One God. *The word which has been planted in you and can save your souls* is – unlike the varied and changeable teachings of other religions – unchangeable and entirely reliable, because the God who has given it is himself free from *alteration* and *change*. So those who have been made *his children by the message of the truth* must *do what the word tells them*, so that they can be the *first fruits* of the new creation which God intends.

The author gives a brief example of what this will mean – *coming to the help of those in need.*