



Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time September 2, 2012 B

THE EPISTLE OF JAMES An easy but challenging read

Every three years during the month of September, we listen to five excerpts from the Epistle of James, who was believed to be the bishop and head of the Church in Jerusalem.

This Epistle was one of the last books to be accepted into the Canon of Scripture. Seemingly, it was not recorded until the fourth century. Martin Luther, founder of the Protestant religion, called this book of the Bible an “epistle of straw.” Why? It placed too much emphasis on the role of good works. Luther taught that we are saved by faith and not good works—something the Catholic religion taught a lot and abused when it held up the purchase of indulgences as good work that could help save one’s soul. Today, Lutherans and Catholics have resolved this Reformation issue by agreeing:

- That, yes, one is saved by faith in Jesus and not by good works
- But that true faith must express itself with good works. In his letter, James says that faith without good works is dead.

A final word of introduction to James. This letter is often called in biblical literature a *wisdom* book like Proverbs and Sirach because, as we shall see, it is full of wise sayings. Prior to today’s reading (1:17-18, 21-22, 27), James says:

“Consider it joy, my brothers (and sisters), when you encounter various trials for you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.” (1:1)

The vast majority of us may not “consider it a joy” when we “encounter various trials.” But we may agree that hanging in there through various trials does make us stronger people.

“No one experiencing temptation should say that he is tempted by God ... God tempts no one” (1:13). Yet in the Lord’s Prayer we say: *“Lead us not into temptation,”* which seems to contradict James’ statement. Scholars tell us that this petition in the Lord’s Prayer is more accurately translated *“Do not let us yield to temptation.”*

Today’s Reading

Today’s excerpt from James has three verses that are worth commenting on and taking to heart.

- *“Humbly welcome the word that has been planted in you and is able to save your souls.”*

We, individually and as a church, must humbly stand under the word of God and allow it to be a light for our feet and lamp for our steps, as the psalmist says. When humility is operating in our lives, it will help us to submit to God’s word and to try our best to act on it. The opposite of “*humbly welcoming God’s word*” is ignoring or resisting God’s word, thinking perhaps that we know better.

- *“Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves.”*

It is one thing to *read, study* and *discuss* Scripture in small groups—all of which is good. But if our reading, study, and discussion are not leading us to *ACT* on what we have heard, then, according to James, we are “deluding ourselves.” Scripture calls us to a particular *way* of life—it calls us to live as Jesus lived, to love as Jesus loved, to forgive as Jesus forgave. Christianity is an “action sport.” In the commentary on the Sunday readings that I provide for small groups, participants are asked each week to name one way they can *act* on the readings that were discussed. That is a challenge for each one of us—to find one way we can *act* on the readings we have just listened to.

- True and false religion. *“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”*

James tells us that true religion must express itself in concrete care for those in need. In Jesus’ time, two of the most vulnerable groups were widows and orphans. They had no safety nets. Hence, James mentions them. In the Gospel, the Pharisees are roundly condemned for practicing *false* religion, one that only focuses on externals. Of the Pharisees, Jesus says in today’s Gospel: *“These people worship me with their lips but their hearts are far from me.”* Those are the most damning words that can be said about anyone’s practice of religion.

Sins of the tongue. Unfortunately, a verse omitted in today’s reading from this section of James is: *“If a person who does not control his tongue imagines that he is devout, he is self-deceived; his worship is pointless”* (1:26).

In the above verse, James says something very powerful and important, i.e., that ‘sins of the tongue’ nullifies our worship of God. Wow! I wonder how many of us take this word of God to heart. Back in July, I said that during the political season, many people commit sins of the tongue in the way that they speak about a candidate that they do not like. Yet, how often do we confess such sins that can nullify our worship of God.

Fr. Vima Dasan, S.J., writes:

Reflecting on God’s word for this Sunday, Indian priest Fr. Dasan writes:

“One editor of a small town paper who became irritated with the number of complaints following one of his editorials, decided to run the Ten Commandments in the place of his next editorial. A few days later a letter arrived reading, “Cancel my subscription. You are getting too personal.” It is amazing that in every area of life people expect rules and regulations except in religion. And yet God says, “Israel, hear the statutes and decrees I am teaching you to observe, that you may live” (Deut. 4:1). God did not give us Ten Suggestions. He gave us Ten Commandments. We can go on breaking them, but we can never get rid of them, for they are written in our consciences. If we disobey them, the disaster will be greater than neglecting the rules of the Highway Code when riding a bicycle. Laws of God are good and necessary, for they are the expressions of God’s loving concern and constant presence. However, we are expected to live by the commandments and not die by them. We will die by them if there is no love in our hearts when observing them, for love of God is the root, and love of our neighbor is the fruit.

God’s laws are supposed to bring our hearts closer to God and to his people in love. Otherwise, the laws will become only obstacles even to justice and decency in human relationships. Hence, where are our hearts and what is in them? We hope that when looking at us the Lord would not complain, “This people pays me lip service, but their hearts are far from me” (Mk 7:6). Christian life is an affair of the heart. Hence we need often to purify our hearts and keep us set on love, true love, of course. For love is the most abused word in our language. It is used to mean anything from self-sacrificing devotion to selfish lust. Therefore in our Christian journey, we must go on purifying even our legitimate human loves, such as affection, friendship and eros, until we have learnt to relate all of these to charity, the highest love which is God himself.

As the external observance of God’s commandments without charity in our hearts, can become obstacles on our journey towards God, so the performance of religious rituals without charity for its motive, can become an obstruction to holiness. We must not minimize the profound value found in the rituals we perform in Sunday worship. We can even dare say that the truth of religion is in the

rituals as the truth of dogma is in poetry. Rituals make religion permeate every action of the day. But in trying to do this we must not allow religion to degenerate into an activity of performance. This is what angered Jesus against the Pharisees. He laughed at them saying, “Empty is the reverence they show me” (Mk 7:7). It is said of a Muslim who pursued an enemy to kill him. In the midst of the chase, the public call to prayer sounded; instantly, the Muslim got off his horse, unrolled his prayer mat, knelt down, and prayed the required prayers as fast as he could. Then he leaped back on his horse and continued his pursuit. It was precisely this kind of legalism that Jesus opposes in us also.

We need to guard against identifying religion with performing external acts. Going to church, saying prayers, reading the Bible and giving to charity do not in themselves guarantee holiness, if we do all these for the wrong motive and in an unloving way. “He means well” is more important than “He does well.” What counts is not so much what we do as why we do. If my heart is filled with bitterness and pride, even my best external act will not make me holy before God. Hence we must often examine: Does our observance of laws and performing of rituals spring from loving gratitude to God, bring us to greater intimacy with Jesus, make us love him and our neighbor, help us to practice corporal works of mercy such as, “looking after widows and orphans in their distress,” and “keep ourselves unspotted by the world which alone make for pure worship?” (Jas 1:27). Yes. It is our hearts that Jesus is concerned about. Of all rites, the rite is to cleanse one’s heart in the company of saints. So long as religion is only an outward form and religious rituals are not experienced in our hearts, nothing of any importance has happened. Hence, it would be good if we at times stand before the Lord just with a broken heart. How else can he enter into it, anyway?

Reflection questions

- What speaks to you most in the above column?
- How do you seek to be a doer of the word?
- Are you usually attentive to “sins of the tongue”?
- How does your religion express itself in care for the poor?

Have a blessed week,

Fr. Dasan