

Easter 5

I take as my text today from St. James' Epistle:

BE ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of heart be always acceptable unto thee, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

Today is the Fifth Sunday after Easter, commonly called Rogation Sunday, one of those seasons of the Church that leaves many of us in this part of the world at a loss as to its significance.

If we were in England, enjoying the traditions that were the basis of our American version of the Church of England, or Anglican Church, we might be more familiar with the origins of Rogation Sunday and the Rogation days.

Indeed, those elaborate Rogation processions are a rarity in these times but, in years past, they were very important in the life of the parish in our mother Church. It was during the processions around the bounds of the parish that the fields were blessed, and prayers offered for a successful crop.

Though we have retained the Rogation Days, as one example, many of these traditions from our English Church heritage are very much different from that which has developed in our own country. This is especially so when we consider that the bounds of a parish church today in our country are so disconnected from the land that surrounds it. This has changed also in England, though not as much in the rural areas.

Of course, we may take it a step further, that is this idea of disconnection and extend it to the Church in general as it has become fragmented into many denominations. Looking back even further, we can find within the Church a disconnection with the Apostolic Age, especially a disconnect with the Church as it existed in the first century. It is as if the Church of the first century existed apart from the Church in the centuries that followed.

Sometimes, we need to be reminded that there are not two Churches: there is not the Apostolic Church and the Modern Church. There is one Church — One Holy Apostolic and Catholic Church — but it has come to have many faces.

The turn of the first century saw the Church coming into its own.

The foundations of the Church were well established by the end of the first century; it had become an organized institution with forms of worship, officers and leaders, and the order of clergy.

The Church was collecting, organizing, and preserving written documents, especially the letters of Paul, Peter, James, and John, as well as the writings of others, such as Ignatius, Polycarp, Clement the 1st, and the documents that were to become known as the synoptic Gospels, those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Without a doubt, many documents produced in the early days of the Church were lost, most certainly, many of the documents produced by Church leaders communicating amongst themselves and with other churches. Evidence that much was lost is quite clear from what has survived; yet those that were essential and basic to its foundation did survive.

Thus, we come to today's Epistle passage from St. James. The thought running through it is just as relevant in the 21st century as it was when James set it down. It is the idea that people go to church and listen as the word of God is being read and expounded upon; then, they go their way, satisfied that they have met the requirements of being a Christian.

They listen but fail to act upon what they hear. I believe I have said, at least one or two times, that *Faith* is actionable — it is not passive.

Now the Epistle of St. James, written sometime between the years 45 and 49, is referred to as a general Epistle, as it was a letter addressed to Jews scattered throughout the world, whether they were Christian or not. It bridges the Old and New Testament, and its special value to us Christians today is not as a treatise on Christian theology, which it is not, but as a practical letter on Christian ethics.

James was writing from the standpoint of a devout Jew who had been converted to Christ by a special appearance of the Risen Lord. Indeed, though having a close relationship with Jesus throughout our Lord's life, James refused to accept Christ as the Messiah until after our Lord's Death and Resurrection.

From the tone of the Epistle, it is clear that James was not a Jew whose observance of the Law, the Torah, not the Pharisaic Law, was merely formal and external; his devotion was true and earnest, and his obedience to the Law was a joy and an inspiration.

As Bishop of Jerusalem, James continued to keep the whole Law as expounded the first five books of the Old Testament, the Torah, yet he was open and receptive to the Gentile converts who had never been Jews by religion.

James was respected in Jerusalem by Jews and Christians alike, but he incurred the hostility of a high priest who brought him before the Sanhedrin in the year 62, accused of violating the Law, and sentenced to stoning.

James' devotion to the Law of Moses and his practical application joyfully to his own life shows forth in his Epistle.

In today's passage, James bridges two millennia of Christianity, cutting to the core and addressing one of our Christian failings: inaction. He tells us that hearing without doing is useless.

James is writing of those early Converts who listened enthusiastically to the preaching and teaching of the Church Fathers and assumed that was all that was needed to be a Christian.

But, not so, says St. James: just hearing the Word of God without living it can be compared to looking at yourself in the mirror; seeing all the blemishes, that is who you really are, and in a while, forgetting all about how you look, in essence forgetting that you are not who you ought to be.

If we examine the words that James uses in his Epistle, we find that it is more than being *doers of the word*. A better understanding of the Greek might be "*keep on becoming agents of the word*."

In the context of the passage, we have a responsibility not just to listen to the Word of God, but to engraft it into our hearts, and act upon it. James puts emphasis on the Mosaic Law that to him is the Perfect Law.

Seemingly, this puts him in opposition to St. Paul, who put the emphasis on faith, and later, Martin Luther, who was altogether opposed to the idea of the Law and works.

But not so: Paul is addressing the issue of who is allowed into the Christian Community, which is by Faith in Jesus Christ, while James is defining how the Christian should live that Faith; thus, we can see that, on the whole, James does not put works ahead of Faith, but sees works as a necessary result of Faith.

James saw that there was an ethical, actionable law. It was found in the Ten Commandments, and in the teaching of Jesus. This comprised the *Perfect Law*. Perfect because it was **God's Law**, given and revealed by him; perfect because it was the way of life laid down by our Lord; it was the *Law of Love*.

For both Paul and James, this **Law of Love** was represented by Jesus when he quoted from Leviticus, chapter 19, verse 18, "*love your neighbor as yourself.*"

But even more, it was the **Law of Christ** which, if we obeyed it, would allow us to fulfill the purpose for which we were sent into the world. In other words, by obeying the **Perfect Law of God**, we would achieve our God-given destiny. Moreover, in keeping the Law of God, says James, we will find true liberty. Be mindful that we are not talking of the convoluted Jewish Law.

As human beings, we are slaves to our passions, emotions, and desires. In accepting the **Will of God**, conforming our wills to his Will, putting ourselves under the **Perfect Law of God**, we truly become free to be what we ought to be and to do what we ought to do.

So, we come now to see that the words of James do not emphasize works over faith; that is a false perception.

Indeed, what James is reminding us of is that the true measure of our faith is what we do with it. Do we hide it? Or do we share it? Does it become a basis for how we live our lives? Is it something we act upon? Or is it just a passive acceptance of the Word of God?

In today's world, we come to church to worship God, to hear his Word, and to be fed at his Holy Table — but it does not end there; must not end there.

We must not deceive ourselves into complacency by falsely reasoning that just hearing God's Word is all that is required of us as Christians. We must live by the Word; engraft it into our lives, into everything that we do. We must embrace the principle that the **Christian Law** is the **Law of Love** and aim at a higher standard of holiness in our lives.

The Christian life is a life of sacrifice and service. Sacrifice in that we offer ourselves to God, our souls and bodies, as a living offering. Service, in that, as the prophet Micah says, "*do justice and love kindness and walk humbly before God.*"

The proof of Faith, proof that the **Word of God** has been fully incorporated into our hearts, its fruits, show forth as good works, works that we cannot resist doing, having acted upon the Grace freely given to us by God through our Lord Jesus Christ.