

Easter 5 - Rogation Sunday

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.

The thought running through today's Epistle passage from St. James is just as relevant in the 21st century as it was when James set it down. 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.

Now, the general Epistle of St. James, written sometime between the years 45 and 49, was addressed to Jews scattered throughout the world, whether they were Christian or not, and bridges the Old and New Testament. 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 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, 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. He was accused of violating the Law, and sentenced to stoning.

There are accounts of James' martyrdom by Josephus, Hegesippus, and Eusebius, the latter providing vivid detail.

James' devotion to the Law 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 enthusiastically listened 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 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, as we can see that, as a whole, James does not put works ahead of Faith, but 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.

It was also something else: it was the Law of Christ that by our obeying 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, says James, we will find true liberty.

As human beings, we are slaves to our passions, emotions, and desires. As Philo said: “All who are under the tyranny of anger or desire or any other passion are altogether slaves; all who live with the law are free.”

Therefore, it is in accepting the Will of God; conforming our wills to His Will; putting ourselves under the Perfect Law of God; that we become truly free to be what we ought to be.

While some may perceive the words of James as emphasizing works over faith, that is a false perception of what James is really trying to tell us over the millennia.

Biblical scholar and commentator, William Barkley probably put it in the right context when he wrote:

“James does well to remind us that what is heard in the holy place must be lived in the market place – or there is no point in hearing it at all.”

Indeed, James is reminding us 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?

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.

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

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

Thus, compelled to action by hearing the Word, we put into practice our Faith; more than that, we live our Faith. In a demonstration of pure religion, we worship God in the beauty of the liturgy, and take it with us into the world in practical service to others.

The beauty of Christian worship must follow us into our daily lives, and it will if we embrace the principle that the Christian Law is the Law of Love; if we aim at a higher standard of holiness in our lives.

We cannot be idle worshippers; we cannot be passive believers.

True, as St. Paul says, we are saved by Faith alone. True, the Grace of God is freely given.

But, we must accept God's Gift of Grace. Like any gift left unwrapped, it will avail us nothing if we don't take it into our lives.

And so it is with Faith: we must let the fruit of our Faith show forth in our works of love through action; we must be doers of the word, not hearers only. In so doing, we will find there is blessedness; there is joy; there is peace.