

The Twenty-sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

Second Reading

James 5:1-6u

Hey everyone, welcome back to another Hurricane Ida evacuation edition of The Mass Readings Explained. I just want to thank everyone again for your patience and your prayers. You can see I'm in a different setting here. Once again I don't have a jacket as usual, and I don't have my library. I was able to evacuate just a few books although I haven't been able to do very much work so far. As we try to recover here in South Louisiana we want to try to keep bringing you here at Catholic Productions the Mass Readings Explained, so we're going to keep going with our study of the letter of James.

We're on the twenty-sixth Sunday in ordinary time for year B and here the Church continues her journey through the letter of St. James, now moving into chapter 5 with a selection from James, one of the harshest sections in the letter of James of his warnings to the rich. Now, before I read the text itself, I just want to recall to mind a certain point here. It's very important to remember. The text I'm about to read is going to sound very harsh especially if you live in an affluent western country like I do and like many of us do and so I want you to remember that again this is one of those examples of where there are very strong parallels between the teachings of Jesus, especially the teaching of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew and the letter of James. If there is any person who doesn't get off easy in the teachings of Jesus it's the wealthy. Jesus' teachings about earthly riches are some of the most stringent in all the gospels, the exhibit A here being of course his famous teaching about it being easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to go into heaven. Which, of course, it's impossible for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, so the teaching, the hyperbolic image of that camel going through the eye of the needle, the upshot of it is to say that it isn't possible for the wealthy to go to heaven apart from God's grace. He'll say that in response to the disciples. "All things are possible with God". They were going to respond by saying, "Lord, who can be saved?" So, that's the backdrop of what we're about to read from James in the fifth chapter of his letter to Jewish Christians spread

throughout the Roman world. So, let's begin. The lectionary is from James 5:1-6 and this is what it says:

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned, you have killed the righteous man; he does not resist you.¹

Ok, so wow, this is a tough text. What's going on here? What's the context of James's warning to the rich? Why is he being so harsh and so forceful with them? There are a couple of points of background that are worth highlighting here. The first one I've already mentioned which is Jesus' own teachings, very stringent teachings about the spiritual dangers posed by wealth. So when James uses the language of "you rich" the Greek word there is *plousious*: those who have a plentitude, a super abundance. That could be translated as "wealthy" or "abounding in possessions". The first point of background is of course Jesus' own warnings to the rich about the spiritual dangers, the deadly dangers of wealth. But a second backdrop you'll recall earlier in the letter of James in chapter 2: James has already had to warn christians in his audience against treating people within their liturgical assembly, within the synagogue is actually the Greek word; it's used here to describe Jewish christians who are coming together in assembly for liturgical worship. James has already had to upbraid them for having two different standards: one for the wealthy and one for the poor. So back in James chapter 2, the lectionary has already given us a passage where when a wealthy person comes into the assembly they pay attention to him. They see his fine clothing and they say, "Well you have a seat here." Whereas if a poor man comes in wearing shabby clothing they say, "You sit on the ground or you can stand over there." So James has already

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

pointed out that there's some economic lack of equality or disparity of treatment based on economic disparity within the church and he says that has no place. That has no place in the Church. So, those two points of background help us understand why this is a theme that's important to James. The question and the problem of wealth, the problem of treating wealthy people differently from poor people in the church.

Now, the second thing you'll notice here is that he doesn't just kind of warn the rich. He invites them to lament, "Weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you." Now, what miseries is he talking about? Well, he's talking about eschatological misery, he's talking about future judgement that is going to come upon the wealthy and that is going to come upon the rich. And the imagery he uses there is of rotten wealth and moth-eaten garments. So he's pointing forward to the end of days. There's a number of elements of eschatology throughout the letter of James. Where, at the end of time, in the final analysis, in the final judgement on the last day, earthly wealth is going to be nothing more than just rotten, moth-eaten possessions that are going to be burned up in the final conflagration. And that image there of a moth-eaten garment, once again, should remind you of the Sermon on the Mount. So if you go back to the Sermon on the Mount, of which there are many parallels between James and this letter. You'll see that Jesus will, on more than one occasion, use the image of a moth-eaten garment to describe the transitory nature of earthly wealth. So in Matthew 6:19, famous saying here, Jesus says, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust consume and where thieves do not break in and steal, for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." So notice here the image Jesus is using here is a distinction between earthly treasure and heavenly treasure, and earthly treasure, no matter how wonderful or great it is, is ultimately going to pass away. It's ultimately transitory. So it is literally irrational, it doesn't make sense to make that earthly treasure our final goal in life, when it's going to pass away. Rather, we should make the treasure that won't pass away, that moths can't destroy, that thieves can't break in and steal, namely the treasure of righteousness, the treasure of the kingdom of God...that needs to be our ultimate aim that drives our every decision, that drives our every action, every single day of our lives, because that wealth is never going to pass away. That wealth is heavenly, and that wealth is eternal. And that's the backdrop to James's letter. We've already

seen him use this distinction between earthly wisdom and true wisdom, i. e. heavenly wisdom: the wisdom that's from above, and here he's applying that distinction to the issue of wealth, and he's using it to upbraid the wealthy in his audience for the fact that they are making...let me put it more strongly...they are placing their salvation at risk, because they are making that their principal aim and their final goal. And he's saying if you're rich you need to weep and howl because you might be in luxury now, but misery is going to come upon you. All this stuff that you love, all these treasures that have filled up your heart, they're all going to be rotted. They're all going to be destroyed. They're all going to be moth-eaten. They're going to pass away. Your gold is going to rust. Your silver is going to rust. And the fact that you love those things rather than the things of heaven is going to be evidence against you that will eat your flesh like fire. Wow. So, the love for earthly things is going to actually come up in the final judgement and it's going to count, James is describing, as evidence against them at the final judgement. This again should make you think of another teaching of Jesus which is the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, where the two die, Lazarus is poor, hungry, and sickly, and he dies and his soul is taken to Abraham's bosom to be at peace. But the rich man, *plousious*...the same term here, a man of super abundant possessions who didn't even take the time to show charity to his neighbor: he is in flames, he's in torment. He is being punished in the flames of Hades. Here we see the same imagery in James, that the wealthy do not show charity to their neighbor and expect eschatological punishment and expect to taste the flames of the fire of judgement. And so James is saying look you've laid up treasure for the last days but you were so focused on earthly treasure, laying up earthly treasure for your last days, your 401k, your retirement, planning for the things of this world and ignoring the needs of the neighbor that it's going to count against you in the final judgement. Like it did against the rich man in the judgement between him and Lazarus.

Now, up to this point in the passage he is speaking in very general terms but now he gets specific, because there is a specific problem that he is addressing among the wealthy. And it's the issue of social injustice in particular of economic injustice through the practice of unjust wages, of failing to pay a just wage to a laborer. And this has always been a problem throughout history, but in an agricultural society it was a particular issue because you would have people who would act as day laborers. They would come in and their sustenance, their daily sustenance was

based on what they could get to work for each day. They would work the fields of the wealthy and so the wealthy had complete control over how much or how little they wanted to pay these day laborers, and they would often pay below what would be a just wage for the amount of work done for that day's labor. So James here uses the specific example of unjust wages for laborers as a kind of love of wealth that's going to bring judgement upon the rich.

So this is what he says, "Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts." So, what's going on here? Well, again, James isn't just deeply rooted in the teaching of Jesus, he's also deeply rooted in the Old Testament. Remember this letter is written in all likelihood for Jewish Christians spread throughout the diaspora. So here James is alluding to a passage from Deuteronomy 24 in the Old Testament. One of the laws of Moses was very specific about not oppressing hired servants, like a day laborer, not oppressing them through economic injustice. This is one of the sins that God particularly hates, and that cries out to Him for justice and for punishment upon the wealthy who exploit the poor and exploit the working class so to speak, we would say. So, for example, if you go back to Deuteronomy 24:14-15 this is what the law of Moses says about economic injustice toward workers:

You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brethren or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns; you shall give him his hire on the day he earns it, before the sun goes down (for he is poor, and sets his heart upon it); lest he cry against you to the Lord, and it be sin in you.

So this is a fascinating passage from Deuteronomy 24 because what it's showing here, a couple of things. First of all, it shows that already in the Old Testament there is this recognition that the poor and the needy, those who have to work for a living, not the wealthy who are super abundant but the poor and the needy who have to work are vulnerable. And God commands His people to show a particular option, a preferential option to care for those who are poor and vulnerable whose livelihood is based on this kind of daily labor. You'll notice in verse 15 it says, "you shall give him his hire on the day he earns it." So one of the things rich people would do is say oh yeah I need you to work my field and then end of the day comes and the man's expecting to get paid and the rich man says oh I'll have

to pay you later. I owe you. And the person might not be able to eat that day. This is their daily sustenance. This is what they need to get by. And there wouldn't be any, especially in this time, in the Mosaic code, there's no legal recourse that he can have. He's totally at the will and the whim of the rich and the powerful. And so his only recourse is that the Lord hears his cry and it will be sin, it will be counted as sin against the wealthy. So the social injustice of unjust wages is not just a social injustice, it's a sin according to the law of Moses. It's a sin in early Jewish society, in the Jewish culture, and it's a sin according to the law of James. There isn't this kind of bifurcation between prayer life and business life. Sometimes people say well that's my prayer life but this is just business like, sorry those kind of rules don't apply. No, not for a Christian, and certainly not for a Christian in the communities that James is writing to. He is very explicit here that economic injustice is basically a violation of the commandment against theft. Because if a person has worked for you and you don't pay them their wages or you don't pay them their just wages you are in effect stealing from them even if they're less powerful than you, even if they're less wealthy than you, that's all immaterial. Wages earned belong to the person who has done the work.

So that economic principle of justice and just wages, which is part of Catholic social teaching, a very important part of Catholic social teaching, modern Catholic social teaching beginning with Leo XIII for example and all the way down through contemporary Catholic social encyclicals is based on Mosaic code, it's based on the teaching of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount, and then ultimately too here it's based on the warnings in the letter of James. And he uses that problem of social injustice and unjust wages to upbraid the rich and says look, and he tells them, "You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter." And then he even goes further and says that kind of luxury will often lead to the condemnation of the righteousness and even to murder. So the oppression of the poor isn't just, it's not only effected in sins of omission, not paying them what they deserve, but also sins of commission, where the powerful and the rich can exploit, oppress, and even kill those who might get in their way. And I don't have to give you, you can think very clearly here about the kinds of crimes that often are tied to the exposure of economic corruption, and the exposure of political corruption, the exposure of those who are powerful and wealthy, if they are exploiting the poor and that is brought to light some people can be murdered, people can be, I want to say oppressed but I'm also saying they can

make their lives miserable with the threat of death because they have power. So, this happened in antiquity in an agricultural context, but it still happens today in a post industrial world as well. That's just some of the context and the details are different but the principles are the same, and the problems are the same and ultimately too you'll notice here James says, "You have killed the righteous man." Now on the one hand that would be just a general way of referring to any righteous poor who are working and who don't receive the just recompense of their labors. But THE righteous man should make you think here of Jesus himself, who is the ultimate example of a poor man, the son of man had no place to lay his head, who was oppressed and ultimately executed by the rich and the powerful of this world. He was the righteous man who was put to death for our sake and our salvation. So there's all kinds of things we could talk about. It's a fascinating, fascinating passage, but I'll give you a couple final thoughts of reflection from the living tradition, Once again I'm going to quote here Bede's commentary, St. Bede of North Umbria in Great Britain and the Catechism of the Catholic Church. So this is what Bede says about this passage:

[A]void, he says, the future miseries of punishment by weeping and by giving alms... Not only does the visible fire of hell torture the wicked and unmerciful rich in torments but also the very memory of decayed and worthless riches by which they might have been able to redeem their nefarious deeds will very easily burn up their souls no less before the judgment and after the resurrection of their flesh as well, when they begin to be seriously angry with themselves for having been unwilling to cleanse their wicked deeds by alms

Pause here. So what Bede is doing, he's going a little further than James, but he's saying something fascinating. What he's saying is if you're wealthy it's almost impossible not to be engaged in the acquisition of wealth without engaging in injustice, without touching the sinfulness of human exchanges between one another when it comes to money and possessions. And so he says one way to avoid the future of miseries of punishment for the rich is not just to weep, to weep over one's sins, but also to atone by giving alms so if you've engaged in economic injustice in the past, if you've stolen, if you've cheated, if you've engaged in any kind of corruption that has lead to the acquisition of wealth, you need to atone for it. You need to make reparation and one of the ways you can do that is by giving alms to

the poor. What he's saying here is that one of the punishments of the wealthy after this life in the fires of hell, we could tie this to purgatory too but we're not going to go into all the details right now, is going to be the regret the wealthy feel for having been unwilling to give alms during their lifetime. Think here again of Lazarus and the rich man. The rich man could have atoned for his sins by caring for Lazarus, but he didn't. He looked the other way. He chose not to, and now he pays the price. So Bede continues:

It also happens rather often in this life that some persons lose the riches which they were putting to evil use and, having lost their resources, *they begin too late to regret that they held them without fruit and lament that they have not given their possessions to the poor...* [H]aving neglected the nakedness and hunger of the poor you rejoiced in accumulating treasures of money for yourselves, not foreseeing that you were yourselves heaping up wrath of eternal judgment for yourselves. ²

So what's going on here? What Bede is saying here is that the wealthy should use this life now and the opportunity to give alms now to atone for their sins through almsgiving. Now this is a standard ancient christian teaching. It's all over the New Testament and it's all over the Old Testament too. It's in Proverbs 19 for example. And early christian literature outside the New Testament, first several centuries, every christian was totally aware of the fact that one of the principal ways to atone for sin wasn't just to say an Act of Contrition or do penance for sin through prayer and fasting, but through almsgiving in particular, to giving to the poor and so this was a way of mitigating the judgement for our own sins. Bede here is drawing on the letter of James to remind the rich that at the end of your life if you haven't spent time giving your possessions to the poor, if you hoarded wealth to yourself, you're going to regret the fact that you didn't use it to atone for your sins, your own sins. So almsgiving, if love covers a multitude of sins, and charity, another translation of *agape*, covers a multitude of sins, then acts of charity, especially acts of almsgiving are extremely powerful ways of atoning for sin. Of making reparation for the damage that we've done through our sinfulness and through our attachment to earthly possessions. You don't have to take my word for this. I always say that, but here we go again: the Catechism, listen to this. This is

² Bede, *Commentary on James 5:2-3*; trans. David Hurst

something striking. It actually lists injustice to the poor and to the wage earner, to workers, if you're not paying your workers a just wage, that's one of a select group of sins that God especially hates. They're called the sins that cry out to heaven.

Listen to this:

The catechetical tradition also recalls that there are “*sins that cry to heaven*”: the blood of Abel, the sin of the Sodomites, the cry of the people oppressed in Egypt, the cry of the foreigner, the widow, and the orphan, *injustice to the wage earner*.³

And there the Catechism actually references Deuteronomy 24:14-15 the passage we looked at earlier as well as James 5:4. So I would especially commend this to a reflection for those of you who are in the business world and also for those of you who work in the church. Are the people who are employed at whatever institution you belong to, whether it's in the church or in the world, are they being paid a just wage? Because if they're not, injustice to the wage earner is a serious, serious sin. It's one of the few sins, one of those several sins that cries out to heaven. And God will hear the cry of the poor.

³ CCC 1867