

The Twenty-fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Wis 2:2,17-20
<i>Response</i>	The Lord upholds my life
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 54:3-4, 5, 6, 8
<i>Second Reading</i>	Jas 3:16-4:3
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mk 9:30-37

Welcome back everyone to the Mass Readings Explained. Here we are in the wake of Hurricane Ida in South Louisiana and I just want to begin by thanking everyone for their patience and for their prayers as we transition from the Covid quarantine edition of the Mass Readings Explained that we've doing for the last several weeks, to the Hurricane Ida evacuation edition of the Mass Readings Explained. As you probably know, those of us who are part of Catholic Productions, myself and Brian Rohm and Michael Madere, that we all live here in South Louisiana and all ours homes and families were directly hit by Hurricane Ida and the catastrophic damage that our region has suffered. So, we're all in exile right now, we're all scattered. We've evacuated and just appreciate your patience and your prayers as we transition through this particular season of producing these videos. I want to thank you all for your prayers and I let you know we're all alive and well and we're working on recovery of our own homes and our area. So, without any further adieu, we're going to dive in, and as long as necessary we'll do it in this format and we'll continue our journey through the letter of James. Let's pick up where we left off last time before the storm.

Today is the twenty-fifth Sunday in ordinary time for year B and the Church continues our journey through the letter of James. Now we're moving out of the famous chapter in James, chapter 2, on faith and works into James chapter 3 which is a little less well known but it is a beautiful section of chapter 3 from James it is given to us in the lectionary on the distinction between true and false wisdom and also a teaching on the question of prayer and of unanswered prayer. So let's look at

the reading for the twenty-fifth Sunday in ordinary time for year B and we'll dive right in. The reading for today is from James 3:16-4:3 and this is what it says:

For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity. And the harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. What causes wars, and what causes fightings among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members? You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.¹

Okay, so what's going on here in this section of the letter of James? There are a few things that are worth highlighting for us. First, the broader context of the passage given in the lectionary is James' discussion in chapter 3 of true versus false wisdom. So he's trying to inculcate, to teach, wisdom to his readers. In fact, I would actually argue that if you look at the way the canon of the New Testament is set up there are certain parallels with the Old Testament. For example, you have the 4 gospels which are the foundational documents of salvation history for the New Testament the same way that the 5 books of the Pentateuch are the foundational salvific historical narrative for the Old Testament. You've got the prophetic writings of the Old Testament find a parallel in the book of Revelation, which is kind of like the New Testament book of prophecy. You've got the Acts of the Apostles functioning as the New Testament parallel of the Old Testament historical book like first and second Kings, first and second Samuel, and first and second Chronicles. And James is an interesting letter because it, in particular, parallels the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. Although it's in the form of an epistle, the letter of James is very much a piece of wisdom literature. It uses a lot of the same themes that you find in the book of Sirach for example, one of the wisdom books of the Catholic Old Testament.

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.

And so in chapter 3 it's not surprising that James actually focuses on the Greek term *sophia* "wisdom". What is true wisdom? In the context of the reading for today he sets up an antithesis between false wisdom and true wisdom, outlining certain characteristics of the two. On the one hand, for example, a false wisdom would be an earthly wisdom or an unspiritual wisdom. And the two terms that James uses there for earthly and unspiritual, *epigeios* and *psychikē*, are literally "of the earth", the word *gaia* in Greek means "land" or "earth" we get the word "geology" from that the science of the earth, the science of the land. And then the other term he uses here is *psychikē* or "soul-ish." So what he's talking about here is the kind of wisdom that has a worldview that only looks at things from a this-worldly perspective. From an earthly perspective. From the perspective of the *psyche* of the human soul, which is still part of this natural world, part of the natural order. And he goes on to lay out certain characteristics of this false wisdom. He says false wisdom is selfish, leads to jealousy, it's false in the truth, it leads to disorder and to vile practices, and ultimately James describes this false wisdom, not in the verses given to us, but in the verses immediately preceding it in chapter 3:13-15 as unspiritual and even devilish or diabolical. The Greek word there is *daimoniōdēs*, so: demonic. To look at truth, to think of wisdom purely in earthly terms is something that is really false to the truth. It is really something that is unspiritual. It is something that James even describes as demonic or devilish, and it leads to all kinds of sinfulness. And he contrasts that kind of wisdom, he contrasts it with true wisdom which is from above. It's peaceable, it's open to reason, it's impartial, it's without insincerity, and it's pure. And James says it leads to a harvest of righteousness. So what I think might be helpful to understand here is that when James is talking about wisdom, maybe a modern term that we could translate that into would be "worldview." A worldview has to do with how we see truth, how we see goodness, how we see beauty, how we look at reality. And then how we act on the basis of those beliefs. So worldview will answer questions like, "where do we come from?" "Who are we?" "What is the problem?" "What is the solution?" "Where are we going? What is the ultimate meaning of life?" Well, if we only answer those questions according to earthly and unspiritual categories, James is saying we're going to miss it, and we're not just going to miss the truth, we're going to actually live lives that lead to earthly ambitions, selfish ambitions, jealousy, disorder, vile practices. However, on the contrary, if we seek the wisdom that's from above, the fruits that we'll bear are fruits of righteousness: peace,

gentleness, mercy, without uncertainty or insincerity. You almost hear echoes of the Sermon on the Mount. You almost have parallels here with 1 Corinthians 13, the love chapter. Love is patient and kind. Love is not irritable or boastful. This is James's way of describing these two ways of looking at life, these two ways of looking at the world, these two kinds of worldviews, these two kinds of wisdom.

Now, he gives us that ultimately as a set-up for his teaching that he's going to explicate about prayer. Now this is very interesting that he would move from the question of worldview, the question of wisdom, how do you see reality, how do you perceive truth, to the question of prayer. Because they're related. The kind of wisdom you embrace, if you embrace an earthly worldview and an earthly wisdom, it's going to affect the way you pray. It's going to affect the things that you seek after, and the things that you ask God for.

So in chapter 4 for the reading for today as it continues he says, "what causes war? What causes fighting? Isn't it your passions that are at war within your members? You desire and you do not have, so you kill. You covet and you cannot obtain so you fight and wage war. You do not have; why? Because you do not ask." Alright so pause there and notice the two things he points at here are desiring: covetous desire that leads to murder, and coveting: a covetous desire that leads to conflict and to fighting. Notice in both of those cases the desire and the passion that James is talking about in context has to do with earthly desires, a desire for wealth, a desire for pleasure, a desire for the things of this world. And those earthly desires reflect an earthly wisdom, an earthly *sophia* rather than the wisdom that is "from above." The wisdom that is of heaven.

So, he comes to a climax in the reading for today and he says the reason you don't have is because you don't ask, and you ask and don't receive because you ask wrongly to spend it on your passions. Now what does that mean? You ask wrongly to spend it on your passions? Effectively, what James here is doing is he is upbraiding his audience for praying in the wrong way because their prayer is rooted in the wrong kind of wisdom. And this, frankly, is something that every christian has to face as a challenge, because our natural inclination and especially in the early stages of the spiritual life or when we're children is to pray for earthly things that we want and for earthly pleasures that we desire. And also, frankly, to

often tend to be upset when those earthly pleasures aren't granted and those earthly prayers aren't answered, in the way that we so choose. And what James is saying here is that prayer that is wrongly ordered is not going to be prayer that is going to be answered. You ask and you don't receive because you ask wrongly in order to spend it on your passions.

Now I can't help when I hear these words to think about the Lord's Prayer. Because if you look at the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father, of which there are several echoes throughout the letter of James, James is one of the letters of the New Testament that scholars have shown that has some of the most explicit and also most quantitatively highest number of allusions to the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7, of course the Lord's Prayer is one of the central elements of the Sermon on the Mount and there in the Sermon on the Mount, in the Lord's Prayer think about the kinds of things that Jesus teaches his disciples to pray for. They don't begin by praying and saying, "I want this, I want that, I'd like this, I'd like that." They begin first of all by desiring the glory of God. "Our Father, who art in heaven..." Number one: let your name be hallowed. Number two: let your will be done. Let your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven. So the first thing we do is begin by praying for the glory of God. That's not the natural inclination of human beings. We tend to pray first for things that we want, not for the glorification of God, but that's the way Jesus teaches the disciples to pray. And then only in the second half of the prayer does he begin to teach them to ask God for the things that we need to pray in a way that's focused on us. "Give us this day our daily bread, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, deliver us from evil." Even in those petitions, you'll notice, only one of them has to really do with essential needs for this natural life, "give us this day our daily bread." And even that verse can be interpreted as a reference to supernatural bread or to the manna of the kingdom. I deal with this in other videos and in my book *The Jewish Roots of the Eucharist*. So Jesus is teaching the disciples there to pray first and foremost for heavenly goods. He's trying to teach them a heavenly wisdom. And the same thing is true here in the letter of James, although he's going at it from a slightly different angle. He's using the fact that their prayers aren't answered to teach them that they're still thinking about prayer from a worldly point of view and according to a worldly wisdom. And so he's helping them to understand: listen, the reason you're having conflict and

the reason you're having strife, the reason you're having fightings between yourselves is because you're still thinking in a worldly way, according to earthly categories and unspiritual truths.

So, the upshot of this, and this is very important, is that unanswered prayer is not a bad thing when the prayer is not rightly ordered. When we ask wrongly. Any parent knows this, right? Because our children, especially when they're young, often ask us for things that aren't good for them. And when we say no, and we don't answer those requests, those prayers so to speak, they often get frustrated and angry and despondent, but as a good parent you know that the child shouldn't always get what he or she wants, but rather what they need. And our ultimate need, our final telos is for this wisdom that is from above, and the fruits thereof of purity, peacefulness, and gentleness and mercy and a harvest of righteousness. Those are the ultimate fruits that we want to bear. It's important to have the fruits of the earth and a harvest of grain, but the fruits of righteousness: that should be our ultimate goal of our prayer.

I'll close with a couple of quotes from the living tradition. St. Bede, who I've mentioned before, early 8th century commentator on the Catholic epistle of James wrote this about this mystery of unanswered prayer. He says:

He... requests wickedly who, despising the commands of the Lord, desires benefits from above from the Lord; he also requests wickedly who, having lost the love of the things above, seeks only to obtain the lower goods, and these not for the support of human frailty but for the superfluity of unnecessary pleasure. For this is what he means when he says "that you may indulge in your concupiscences" [James 4:3]. ²

And then again the Catechism says:

"You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions."

² Bede, *Commentary on James* 4:3; trans. D. Hurst .

He quotes the reading from this week. And it says:

If we ask with a divided heart... *God cannot answer us, for he desires our well-being, our life.* (CCC 2737)

So both of those texts from the tradition, both St. Bede and the Catechism of the Catholic Church recognize that when our prayer is too focused on lower goods, and we've lost the love of things above, and we go beyond asking of God the things we need for our human frailty, which by the way, this is very clear, is perfectly fine to pray for the necessities of our life, but when we go beyond that and we ask God for things we don't actually need or we ask God for things with a divided heart, the Catechism is saying God cannot answer us. Because He is not going to give us things that might actually be harmful to us, but rather He's going to, or rather He desires, He does desire our wellbeing and our life. And that wellbeing and that life is not just the life of this world, but ultimately a life of the world to come.