

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

The 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year B continues the study of the Letter of James in the lectionary, this wonderful beautiful example of one of the Catholic Epistles. And in 3:16-4:3, we read these words:

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

You see at the end of letter, James gets a little hard-hitting here, where he's not just exhorting his readers, but also upbraiding them and making them aware of their inclination to sin in order to bring them to correction. So there are a few elements of this passage that are worth highlighting. The most central one for me, I think, is the contrast between two kinds of wisdom. So there's a false wisdom and a true wisdom that James is inculcating in his readers. For example, if you look, we have

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.

a little chart here of the two different kinds of wisdom. On the one hand, false wisdom, James describes as earthly wisdom or unspiritual wisdom. Literally, in the Greek, the word there is *psychikē*, so it sounds like it's psychic wisdom. It doesn't mean what we would mean today by psychic. *Psychikē* just means soulish, right? *Psuché* is the soul, whereas *pneuma* is the spirit of a person. So the writers, like Paul and James, will draw a contrast between the soul of a human being and then the spirit, which is the more supernatural, even though the soul we think of the soul as supernatural because it's immaterial, but the spirit is a supernatural component, so to speak, of the person. It is the supernatural animating force of a person who is in Christ. And so the soul sometimes will tend to be that aspect of the human being that looks at the world through purely human eyes as opposed to the supernatural lens of what God has in store for the eschatological resurrection of the body, the new creation and that kind of thing.

So an earthly wisdom or a soulish or unspiritual wisdom is also, if you go back to the chart, it's selfish. It's jealous. It tends to falsehood. It's even demonic, James describes — fascinating that false wisdom is a devilish or demonic wisdom that ultimately leads to disorder and vile practices. Now obviously what James is describing here is no wisdom at all, right? It's a false wisdom, but what he means by wisdom is our outlook on the world, right? The Greek word for wisdom is *sophia*. We get the word philosophy from that. *Philosophia*, sometimes translated as love of wisdom. That's fine, but it even more it means friendship with wisdom, that a person cultivates a relationship with acquiring and accumulating and growing in wisdom. So basically what James is actually describing here is two philosophies. You have the false philosophy that's earthly, unspiritual, selfish, jealous, even demonic and leads to sin and vile practices.

And if you look back at the chart, on the other side you have true wisdom. True wisdom, a true philosophy is a philosophy that sees the world through a heavenly lens. It is from above. It is peaceable. It is open to reason. This is so important. So many people who embrace a false philosophy actually, ironically, end up embracing irrationality. They're not open to reason. You can always see that someone has a false philosophy if you bring up an objection to their philosophical worldview and instead of responding with a reasonable reply, they get angry or inclined to violence. So that kind of philosophy is not open to reason, right? It's

either driven by emotions or passions or politics or power or some other motivating factor, whereas true wisdom is always open to reason. It's open to the use of the rational function of the intellect, rational argumentation via the intellect.

So if you go back to the chart, true wisdom is also impartial, right? It tries to be objective. It is without insincerity. So it's unhyprocritical is literally the Greek word there, *anypokritos*. So there's a kind of integrity between what the person says and what they do, between what the person claims to believe and then how they act. And this is important because some philosophies are basically self-contradictory or self-destructive. If they were actually lived out, the person would need to take actions that would undermine the very philosophy they claim to be embodying. So again, back to the chart, true wisdom is pure and it also leads to the harvest of righteousness. So you can look at the fruits. False philosophy leads to bad fruits, vile practices, sinful activity, jealousy, war, disorder; whereas true philosophy, according to James, true wisdom, *sophia*, leads to a harvest of righteousness. It leads to the fruits of righteousness, so that what is sown in peace bears fruit by those who make peace.

This is a passage that...it's very simple and almost deceptively simple at first with these basic series of contrasts, but you could really take some time to meditate on, "what does this look like in the world?" There's so many false philosophies running around. What disorders and vile practices do they lead to? How do they manifest themselves as not open to reason? How do they manifest themselves as partial rather than impartial, subjective rather than objective, insincere and hyprocritical rather than sincere and pure and integral? So it's a really fascinating text, and I actually don't think that it's a coincidence that it's James, the Letter of James, that gives us this vision of two competing philosophies or two kinds of wisdom, false wisdom, earthly wisdom and then heavenly wisdom. And that's because out of all the books in the New Testament that are the most similar to the Wisdom literature in the Old Testament, it's the Letter of James.

So, you know, if you look at the genres of books in the Old Testament, what do you have? You have the Law (the Pentateuch), you have the Historical Books, you have the Prophets, and you have the Wisdom literature, right, which consists of Psalms and Proverbs and Sirach and that kind of thing. Well, there's an obvious parallel

between the Gospels and, say, the Historical Books of the Old Testament, as well as the Pentateuch, you know, the foundational narratives of Jesus and the early Church. So the Gospels are very similar to the Pentateuch, Acts is very similar to the Historical Books of the Old Testament. It is a history of the early Church, like the Historical Books give you a history of Israel. The Book of Revelation is similar to the Prophets of the Old Testament, but when it comes to the Wisdom literature, it's really the Letter of James that is the most similar to the kind of proverbial wisdom that you have in the books of, say, Wisdom or Sirach in the Old Testament. Because if you read James, it is a letter, I mean, it is in the form of a letter, but it's really a kind of collection of all these sayings and proverbs strung together by the author James, and he's applying them to the congregation. But there's still a very philosophical cast to it. It's very similar to Wisdom Literature. So I sometimes will tell my students, you know, James is the wisdom book of the New Testament. And I think that that's manifest today in today's reading, contrasting these two kinds of wisdom, heavenly wisdom versus earthly wisdom. Just my little idea, but I think it's worth pondering.

With that said, the last aspect of the passage that is important is that James says that bad philosophy leads to bad prayer. A bad form of wisdom, a false form of wisdom, leads to poor prayer. Because, he says, those who embrace a kind of earthly philosophy end up fighting among themselves. They have wars, their passions are at war with one another, and what they end up doing is their prayers go unanswered, precisely because they ask wrongly. So a person with a worldly philosophy, if they pray at all, when they pray, what do they tend to do? Ask for earthly things? Money, wealth, health, power. And James is upbraiding at least some members of his audience for praying in that way. So treating God almost as a kind of divine dispenser of earthly goods, so that when you need some kind of earthly blessing, you ask God for it so that you can spend it on your passions. And, this verse, again, it didn't make in the lectionary, but I'm going to tell you anyway because it's here in the Bible. The very next verse after James says this is actually very revealing because he says:

You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. Unfaithful creatures! Do you not know that friendship with the

world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

This is one of the strongest statements on the countercultural character of Christianity, right? On the one hand, John 3:16, God loves the world. There's no doubt about that. He made the world. He loves the world and He so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son so that whoever believes in him might not perish but have eternal life. That's the Gospel, John 3:16. But James 4 is also clear that insofar as the world is falling, insofar as it is transient, insofar as it is under the power of the enemy and of the Evil One, there's also enmity with the world, so that a Christian is called not just to be in the world but not of the world, but also in a very real sense, to be at enmity with the world. Because loving the world can lead to enmity with God. If we fall in love with the things of this world — Augustine will deal with this in great detail in his famous *City of God* — we also will fall out of love with otherworldly realities, right? As Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, you can't love God and mammon. You can't serve God and money. You have to pick one. And so James here tells us that friendship with the world, in other words, loving the transient things of this fallen world, is in fact enmity with God. So that when we pray then, to take it back to the reading for the lectionary, we need to make sure that our prayers are animated by the heavenly wisdom that is from above and that prays for peace, that's open to reason, that's pure, and that's focused not the acquisition of earthly things, but on cultivating a harvest of righteousness.

So in closing, I would just like to end with another example of the interpretation I'm sharing with you from St. Bede's wonderful commentary on the letter of James when he writes this. Here Bede is talking about a person who prays improperly:

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

In other words, what Bede is saying is that it is one thing to pray for your earthly needs. Jesus taught us to do that, right? “Give us this day our daily bread.” It's another thing to focus your prayers on acquiring unnecessary earthly pleasures, right? Or superfluous goods. No, Jesus taught his disciples to pray for what they need, but he did not teach them to allow their passions to dictate their prayers, to be focused on chasing every pleasure or earthly good that they might want to acquire. So James is trying to teach his audience here a more mature form of Christian prayer. And I think this is actually one of those things where, again, we see real wisdom in the Letter of James. Because there are many times, especially if you're a parent, you know this. Children will ask for things because they want the pleasure that accompany those things, and not because those things are actually good for them.

How many parents out there can remember a time where one of their children asked for some toy or a game or a video console or sweets, or whatever it might be, or some kind of food or drink that might actually not be healthy or might be harmful to them, right? And as a parent, you don't answer the children's requests, not because you don't love them, but precisely because you do, right? James here, and St. Bede is recognizing, that that's the kind of God we have. He's going to answer our prayers according to His heavenly wisdom rather than our earthly wisdom. And the Catechism actually, paragraph 2737, makes the same point about this very verse. When it says this:

You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.” If we ask with a divided heart... God cannot answer us, for he desires our well-being, our life. (CCC 2737)

So, sometimes people will be upset with God because he didn't answer their prayer, when in fact some unanswered prayers are precisely the result of the fact that God is unable to answer us because he desires a higher good for ourselves than we even desire on our own. In other words, we're like little children, asking for things we

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

don't really need and for things that might actually harm us, so that unanswered prayers — and as we grow we tend to learn this — can actually be a blessing from God as he teaches us to acquire a heavenly rather than an earthly wisdom.

And then again the Catechism says:

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

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)