

The Twenty-sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

Second Reading

James 5:1-6u

The 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time brings our journey through the Letter of James to an end, with a very powerful reprobation of the wealthy who are abusing the poor in the community to which James is writing. So if you look at James 5:1-6, let's hear what James's warnings are to the wealthy in his audience, James says this:

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

Tell me how you really feel, James. He's not holding back here with these words of reprobation and warning to the wealthy in the audience to which he's writing. So let's see if we can try to understand where these words are coming from and what they might mean for us today. So the first thing, we want to be clear here, is that James is now singling out a particular group among his audience, namely the *plousious*, the wealthy, the rich, and he goes straight for the eschatological punishment that they're going to experience. He says:

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.

...weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.

He's basically warning the rich that they're going to experience eschatological punishments. And the answer is of course, well, why? What have they done wrong? And here James makes really clear, if you look in context, what appears to have happened is that the wealthy have been storing up their wealth and both failing to care for the poor, and even more than that, failing to pay their laborers who are working for them and give them their due wages. So let me pause and explain this for a second. It's important to remember that in the ancient world, the vast majority of people were poor, but the wealthy could be identified primarily by those who owned land, right? So land owners would often be extremely wealthy, they'd have vast amounts of land, and then they would employ the poor to work the fields, to work their lands. It's an agricultural society. It's structured around harvest and so what James is noting here is that the the day laborers, the kind of people who would come into fields and vineyards an work for daily wages, have given their labor, but the owners of the vineyards and the owners of the land aren't paying them.

So you can imagine a scenario where someone would come in and say I'm going to work for a day for you. You go out, you work till sunset and then when sunset comes you come in and the owner says "oh sorry, I don't have anything to pay. Come back tomorrow and I'll pay you." And then they come back the next day, "I'm sorry I don't know you." So you could easily see how fraud could enter in and corruption, how tempting it would be to defraud people who were just day laborers, the kind of people who had no social status, no social power, no recourse to get that money back from you if you had defrauded them, if you were a rich landowner. So that appears to have been what is going on here? The wealthy have multiple garments. They have gold and silver. They're laying up treasure for their lives in the future, right? They're putting their stocks away. And meanwhile, they're not even paying the laborers who have worked their fields. And so what God says is...notice what he doesn't say. He doesn't say, "This is not good. You should just go and pay the laborers." He actually goes straight to the final judgment and says "the rust of the gold and silver you've gathered up is going to be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire." So he's pointing there to the fires of judgment.

And he also uses fascinating imagery here when he says that the wages of the laborers that you kept back by fraud cry out to me and the cries of the harvesters have reached His ears. That's an allusion to a principle in the Old Testament. It's very interesting. If you go back to the Old Testament in the Book of Deuteronomy 24:14-15, you'll notice that the principle of not withholding wages from a laborer is actually part of the Mosaic law. It goes all the way back to the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 24:14-15, it says this

You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brethren or one of the sojourners [immigrant] 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, very significant. Notice, it's an agricultural society. A lot of men would make their wages to provide for their families by day labor. So if you work an entire day and then you don't receive the wage that you worked for, you have no way to feed your family that night. You might not have the requisite money just to pay for your basic daily needs. So what God says is, in the Mosaic Law, already in the Old Testament, if somebody works for you in a field as a day laborer, you have to pay them by law before the sun goes down, right? If you don't, and they cry out to God against you, you're going to be punished for withholding just wages from that worker. So here we see kind of the beginnings of the Church's social doctrine, right, which will play out especially in the social encyclicals of the 19th and early 20th centuries, about just remuneration for work, about the dignity of the laborer, about the idea of a just wage being paid to a laborer.

Those are kind of modern expressions in papal teaching, but they actually ultimately go back not just to the Letter of James, but to the Book of Deuteronomy as well. So this is just a salutary warning to the wealthy, then as now, who have a lot of power and a lot of control over regular working people. Especially immigrants, note that. The sojourner in a foreign land is especially vulnerable to being exploited, right? And you don't need me to tell you about how that is happening in our own day with the massive migration taking place all around the Western world. Many immigrants are exploited and either paid less than they are due, because the wealthy who are paying them can get away with it, because it's often illegal payments, or they're just not being given a just wage, a competitive

wage to provide for their families. This is a very grave social injustice, and it's one that the Bible decries over and over again as one of the sins that cry out to heaven.

There are only certain sins in the Bible that are singled out as particularly grave, and failure to pay a just wage to a worker is one of those sins. It's a grave social injustice and it will bring, according to James, not just temporal punishment, but it could even bring eternal punishment of the wealthy on the last day, on the final day of judgment. So it's a very serious, very sobering passage, because effectively, look at the last line, you've condemned, you've killed the righteous man. He does not resist you. Now, James doesn't seem to mean here that the wealthy are literally murdering the poor, but by withholding wages from the poor, they are effectively putting that person to death. They are violating the 5th commandment, not through violence, but through greed. That's really what he's describing here.

So again, the lectionary stops there. I wish you could keep going because everything is so intertwined in James, but the very next verse says:

Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord.

Until the parousia. So he then turns and exhorts the poor. What he is saying to the poor there is although you may not receive justice in this life, eventually, at the parousia, at the final judgement, the Lord will come and he will make all things right. The first will be the last and the last shall be first. So I will close today with another quote from St. Bede. I can't get enough of Bede here when it comes to the Letter of James. For me, this is my favorite early medieval commentary. St. Bede says this 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 there. Wow, Bede is saying that when James says the rust of the coins will eat their flesh by fire, what that means is that the wealthy who die without giving to the poor and without treating their workers justly, will realize they could have paid off the debt of their own sins by giving alms to the poor and by giving wages, just wages, to their workers. But instead, they withheld that money for themselves and so they remain, ironically, in the debt of their sins for all eternity. Very powerful, powerful witness from St. Bede. He continues, says a little bit more:

...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 internal judgment for yourselves.²

So this is really crucial. What James is saying here, this is so important. Sometimes people nowadays, in fact often people nowadays will say, well, I never killed anybody, right? They often use that as an example of their own virtue. Like, I could not possibly deserve to be separated from God for ever in eternity when I've never killed anybody on earth. And what James says is, well, there's more than one way to harm your neighbor, and to withhold wealth from those who are in need, to withhold money from the poor, who are dying from poverty, is a form of violating the 5th commandment, in a sense, right? And so, Bede says, what the wealthy should do is use their wealth now to pay off the debt of their sins so that they won't have to pay for that in eternity. So it's a kind of interesting analogy from the economic realm that I at least would imagine, or at least in my experience, we modern people don't tend to think of almsgiving in this way, right? We tend to think of almsgiving as purely a kind of — sorry for the big word — supererogatory work, right? In other words, we go above and beyond. We don't have to do it, but we do it just because we want to, to be charitable, so to speak. In the ancient Church and in the medieval Church, they actually didn't see almsgiving that way. They recognized that all of us stand in debt spiritually, like we've built up the debt

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

of our sins, and that one of the ways we can help remit that debt is through the sacrificial act of giving away our wealth, giving away our possessions to the poor and to the needy.

Almsgiving, in other words, has a kind of sacrificial and redemptive character to it, which we tend in the modern world to often overlook. There's a great book by a scholar at Notre Dame, Gary Anderson, on Almsgiving, which works through this in great detail and kind of shows you the theology of Almsgiving as having an atoning or even redemptive quality that's not just present in the in the New Testament, it's also present in the Old Testament as well. But it's really on display here in the Letter of James 5 today, where James is saying those who fail to give alms actually build up a debt that they will pay in the fires of the final judgment.

So in closing then I just want to emphasize that quote from St. Bede, and also from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, that now days many Catholics are going to be aware of the gravity of many sexual sins or the gravity of certain sins of violence, like murder, but it is also important to remember that sins that involve wealth and refusal to give just wages to those who have earned them are also one of the grave sins that cry out to God from heaven. So the Catechism says this, and I'll close with it, 1867. We'll go out on a high note here:

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* [cf. Deut 24:14-15; James 5:4]. (CCC 1867)

That is one of the sins that cry out to heaven. So we want to avoid that injustice and rather build up what St. James himself refers to as a harvest of righteousness.