

The Twenty-second Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8
<i>Response</i>	O Lord, who shall sojourn in thy tent? Who shall dwell on thy holy hill?
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 15:2-3, 3-4, 4-5
<i>Second Reading</i>	James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

The 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year B begins the Church's journey through the wonderful letter of James, which is one of the Catholic Epistles in the New Testament, and is sometimes neglected, but much to our detriment. So it's a wonderful thing that the Church takes some time in the liturgical year to work through this beautiful, wonderful letter of James with some very important teachings on morality and on life in Christ. And the teaching from today comes from James 1:17-18, 21-22, 27; So it's a kind of a container of a few different verses that have been collected together. Let's hear what they have to say. James writes:

Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from *the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change*. Of his own will he brought us forth by *the word of truth* that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures...

Then it skips down to verse 21.

Therefore put away all filthiness and rank growth of wickedness and receive with meekness *the implanted word, which is able to save your souls*. But be *doers of the word, and not hearers only*, deceiving yourselves...Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.¹

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.

So you can see there are some theological aspects to the letter of James that are worth noting. For example, James here gives us a teaching on what we might refer to as divine immutability. The idea that God is eternal and therefore as an eternal being, as one who is outside of time, He doesn't change, right? We change. In fact, time is nothing other than the measure of our change, right? But God does not change, right? In fact, as he says, with him "there is no variation or shadow due to change." So it's a basic reflection here on the immutability, the unchangeable character of God the Father.

We also see James reflecting on the fact that the Word of God has the power to save our souls, right? So, for example, in the Gospel of John, the Word will become flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. Here, James is reflecting on just the implanted word, the word that is implanted into the heart of a Christian, of a disciple of Jesus, although that's not the language he uses, as Christian doesn't occur in this particular letter. That phraseology is in 2 Peter, but it's not in the letter of James. But a follower of Jesus has the implanted word within us that's able to save our souls, precisely by enabling us to put away wickedness and filthiness and live lives in accordance with the word. And this is going to be one of the key aspects of the letter of James. He's very interested in the kind of lives that followers of Jesus and that believers in Jesus lived, right? So the verse that the Lectionary highlights today, "be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves", is really, I would argue, one of the most important lines in the overall letter of James. As you read through this letter, you're going to see he's very concerned with hypocrisy and he's very concerned with people believing in Jesus, but not doing what Jesus told them to do. We're going to see this especially in James 2, when we get to the whole issue of the relationship between faith and works, and how faith without works is dead. But in this first chapter, he's beginning with a kind of moral exhortation to not only recognize that the Word of God has been implanted in the hearts of believers in Jesus, but also that they are to be doers of that Word, and not simply hearers only, because those who hear the word, but do not do the Word, are basically deceiving themselves, right?

And this, again, should be an echo that we've heard several times in several of the other Catholic epistles of the Sermon on the Mount, right? How does the Sermon on the Mount end? It ends with Jesus's moral exhortation to his audience, saying "not everyone who says Lord, Lord will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." So Jesus warns his audience that hears the Sermon on the Mount, but doesn't put it into practice, that they're going to be like the foolish man who built his house on sand, and when the floods

came, it wiped it away. So too James takes a similar exhortation and says to his listeners, don't just be hearers of the word, but doers of it. And don't deceive yourself, because if anyone hears the word and doesn't do the word, they're not going to reap the fruits and the benefits of the word which was implanted in their souls for their salvation.

And the lectionary here selectively gives us a verse that illustrates that, but it's one of the most famous verses in the Epistle of James, so it's fitting that it be highlighted. Namely, this verse 27, that:

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

There's so much we could say about this verse because, as you probably know, if you've lived in a contemporary Western or European Society in particular, there's a very popular mantra these days, especially among post-Christian members of society, to say, well, I'm a spiritual person, but I'm not a religious person. You also find some Protestant denominations of Christianity attacking religion as a bad thing and setting it in opposition to faith. For example, they'll say, "I have faith in Jesus Christ, but I'm not religious and I don't believe in religion." Usually it'll take the form of "I reject organized religion." That's one of the criticisms people will make. So it's a very individualistic understanding of Christianity. So in response to those kind of contextual objections, it is important to point out that according to the New Testament, although the word religion doesn't occur often, it does occur in very key contexts. And James 1 is one of the most important because we see that religion is a positive thing and that there's a certain shape that it needs to take in order to be pleasing to God.

So let's just break down this verse for just a minute. The first thing we want to notice is that the Greek word for religion is *thrēskeia*. This gets translated into the Latin Vulgate as *religio*, right? So that's why we use the English word religion in our translation. And if you had to define what *thrēskeia* means, the basic meaning of it is that it can usually be identified as acts of worship of some deity, right? So for example, the word *thrēskeia* gets used to describe Jewish worship by Philo of Alexandria, he's a 1st century Jew, like the kind of worship that Jews offered to their God in the Temple. Pagan writers, like Dionysius of Halicarnassus, will use the same word, *thrēskeia*, to describe Pagan worship of various gods and goddesses, right? And the term will even get used in some of the early Church

Fathers, like 1 Clement, to describe Christian worship of Christ and of God the Father in the New Covenant.

So basically, the word religion doesn't just refer to the kinds of things I believe, because I belong to a particular religion, a particular denomination, but rather the kinds of things I do. It's the worship that I offer to my deity. Now that will obviously be shaped and determined by beliefs, but *thrēskeia* / *religio* does focus on that outward expression of belief in the form of worship. We actually can see this...it gets utilized elsewhere in the New Testament, for example in Acts 26:5, that will talk about the religion of Israel. Colossians 2:18 uses this to talk about the religion of angels, which is a weird expression, and we can't really use that to clarify James in this case because it's debated as to whether Paul's talking about the worship of angels, like worshipping angels, or whether he's describing the kind of worship that the angels give to God in heaven. So it's a little bit ambiguous.

But for our purposes here, what James is saying is that Christian religion, in other words, the religion of those who belong to Christ, that is pure and undefiled before God the Father, is twofold. He gives two descriptions: “to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” Now that's a fascinating definition of religion. If you think of *thrēskeia* as predominantly, or primarily, being manifested by liturgical acts of worship, like in temples and tabernacles or various cultic sanctuaries, this would be a surprising statement. Pure religion, according James, undefiled religion is to visit orphans and widows. So it's an act of charity toward our neighbor, to express love of neighbor and then to keep oneself unstained from the world. So James seems to be describing religion as constituting basically acts of charity and acts of purity or holiness, keeping oneself in a state of holiness, unstained, obviously, from the sinful elements of the world. I think this is a fascinating description, because what it shows is true religion doesn't just involve love of God, but it also involves love of neighbor and the goal of striving for one's own personal sanctification, one's personal holiness.

Which remember, this would have been a kind of a novel idea in some ways, especially in a Greco-Roman setting, where religion was about placating the gods through performing the requisite public sacrifices, right? It's not necessarily about personal sanctification or personal growth in virtue, much less about, you know, expressing that through love of neighbor for people like the widows and orphans. The Christian religion was different. Jesus didn't just give one commandment, love of God, as the heart of the law. He also gave love of neighbor as the heart of the

law as well. So you see that beginning to manifest itself in the letter of James' very important description of pure and undefiled religion.

Now, one reason I also think this is a significant passage is because you can imagine, both in a Jewish context and an early Christian context, that some people might be tempted to think that because they performed the requisite public acts of worship, that they've done everything that is necessary to be a religious person, to be a holy person. But what James is saying is that those who engage in liturgical acts of worship but ignore love of neighbor, right, who are hearers of the word but not doers, are in fact deceiving themselves and not practicing the kind of religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the kind of religion that's pleasing to God, right? It's not enough to offer sacrifices and worship of God if you're going to ignore your neighbor. It's not enough to love God and not love your neighbor. If you fail to love your neighbor, you're also failing to love God, and you're practicing a religion that is not pure and undefiled before God.

We are going to see this play out in Chapter 2 of James in particular, right? The idea of gathering for liturgical assembly, well, that's sufficient for me to love God, and it doesn't matter how I treat my neighbors, even in the context of liturgy. And perhaps you can also imagine today, someone who might think, well, I go to Mass, right? I performed my duty, my liturgical duty of worship. It doesn't matter how I treat the poor. It doesn't matter what I do with my money. That's my business, right? Not according to James. True religion doesn't involve just acts of worship of God, but involves visiting orphans, visiting widows in their affliction, and it involves keeping oneself unstained from the sins and defilements of the world. A very important text, very important point, and you'll see this elsewhere in the Catholic Epistles. The fact that one of the striking aspects of early Christian preaching and early Apostolic preaching is calling all people, laypeople included, to holiness. It's not just the priests, right, who are called to holiness, as we'll see in one of the other Catholic epistles of 1 Peter, right? But everyone who is a member of Christ is called to be a member of a holy priesthood, a royal nation, right, offering spiritual sacrifices to God that are pure and unblemished sacrifices.

Alright, so that's a little bit there. Just to give you an example of this from the living tradition, I'm going to make this recommendation more than once, but Venerable Bede is one of the first Fathers and Doctors, he's a Doctor of the Church, to have a commentary on all seven Catholic Epistles. And his is really easy to read, it's really accessible. He gives a lot of insight into all seven of the Catholic Epistles, especially his comments on the letter of James I find helpful. So this is what St. Bede said in his commentary on the passage from James for today:

Admirably he added “before God and the Father, because *there are those who appear religious to other people, when they are held by God to be idolators*. Hence Solomon also says, “There is a way which appears righteous to people, but in the end it leads down to death” (Prov 14:12)... Because he had said that the doer of the work would be happy in his action, now he says *what actions are particularly pleasing to God*, namely *mercy and innocence*. For when he orders us “to visit orphans and widows in their tribulation” he implies all the things we ought to do mercifully for our neighbor. How much this avails at the very time of judgment will be manifested when the judge comes to say, “As long as you did it for one of the least of these my brothers, you did it for me” (Matt 25:40). *In turn, when he commands us to keep ourselves stainless from this world he shows in detail all things in which it behooves us to keep ourselves spotless*. Among these are also those things that he had advised us above to observe, that we be slow to speak and slow to anger.”²

This is one of the verses that came earlier in the letter. I think it's fascinating that Bede highlights, he kind of summarizes the two teachings of James about pure religion as mercy and innocence. And let me say why I think this is interesting, because I think that, at least in my own experience, there's a kind of tension between both of these poles. Some people will think, for example, that all that matters is that they perform liturgical acts of worship, and that's all they need to do to be a good Christian. They don't have to give to the poor. They don't have to engage in acts of charity. It's liturgy and worship, that's the main thing, right? Other people will think, Oh well, if I just do good things right, then not only do I not have to attend liturgy, but I don't have to keep myself unstained from the world. I can live a life that's very worldly and that engages in sin that I don't make an attempt to repair or repent of, as long as I'm doing good things, as long as I'm engaged in acts of charity toward others. That, in a sense, eases my conscience by performing acts of service. And what James is saying is that neither one of those options is sufficient in itself. We have to both practice acts of charity, acts of mercy, but we also have to practice seeking holiness and preserving ourselves from the world and engaging in the worship of God. So it's a both/and not an either/or with regard to those. So we can't trot the path of thinking that as long as I worship God, I'm fine, or as long as I do acts of goodness, I'm fine. Both of them go together, and at the end of the day both of them are ordered toward our pursuing

² Bede, *Commentary on James* 1:27; trans. David Hurst.

the life of holiness, so that we might do what James says and be doers of the Word in all of its facets, and not just hearers only.