

## **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>Psalms</i>	Psalms 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

Hey everybody, welcome back to another quarantine edition of the Mass Readings Explained. Just want to thank everybody for their patience as we try to make it through this pandemic. So I'm going to do a little more personal version. I'm going to look right at the camera here and we're going to take up — today is the second, I'm sorry, today is the 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time for year B. And we're beginning a journey through one of my favorite letters in the New testament, and that is the letter of James.

So without any further ado, we're going to dive into the second reading for this 22nd Sunday. It's from the first letter — or not the first letter, the only letter — from James in the New Testament, chapter 1. The lectionary here gives us an excerpted passage from verses 17-18, 21-22, and then it skips on down to 27. So I'm going to work through those with you here, and then we'll try to unpack them and shed some light on them. So the reading says this:

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.

And 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.

And then it skips all the way down to verse 27, to this kind of climactic statement in the first chapter of James. It says:

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.<sup>1</sup>

Alright, so what's going on here in James chapter 1? Just a few points here about the letter of James in general. First, remember that James is one of the so-called Catholic epistles, and it's referred to as a Catholic epistle not because it was written to Catholics as opposed to the Pauline epistles of St. Paul which were written to Protestants. That's not the idea. From ancient times, the letters of James and 1, 2, and 3 John, and 1 and 2 Peter, and Jude were referred to as the Catholic epistles precisely because unlike some of Paul's letters — like the ones written to Corinth or Rome or Galatia — they weren't written to a particular local church or even a group of churches within a local region. They were catholic; they were universal. They were designed more as encyclicals, so to speak, written for Christians scattered throughout the Roman Empire.

You can actually see this in James chapter 1, verse 1, where it says:

To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion...

So the imagery there is of the Jewish Christian Diaspora of Jewish believers in Christ who have been spread throughout the Greco-Roman world outside of the Holy Land in what was known as the Diaspora. So in this case, James and the other Catholic epistles, just like the Pauline epistles, are a principal witness to early Gentile Christianity, although Paul certainly has some Jewish Christians in view in some of his letters, like Romans in particular.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

But the Catholic epistles are a principal witness to really Jewish Christianity, to Jewish believers. You see this in Peter, 1 and 2 Peter as well, as well as in the letters of John. So anyway, just to bring that point out here, that when we turn to James in the readings of the lectionary and we get to the second reading, it's giving us this important witness to early Jewish Christianity.

Now within that context, one of the first themes that the letter of James (one of the principal themes of the letter of James) is going to be emphasized is the distinction between simply hearing the Word of God and doing the Word of God — in other words, between just believing and actually living out that faith through action.

And so in this first chapter, James is kind of preparing his readers for that keeping, which is really going to come to prominence in James chapter 2, with the famous teaching about faith and works, the relationship between the two, and how faith without any works is dead. But he prepares his reader, first and foremost, by highlighting a few elements about God, about the Word of God, and about the nature of religion.

So the first thing he teaches is what we might call the immutability of God, the unchangeableness of God, when he says:

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. (James 1:17)

Okay, so there we see basically a kind of very Jewish theology of creation itself, recognizing that everything that is good, everything that exists that is good in the world is a gift. It all has its source and its origin in God, who as the first principal of all creation, as the one from whom all things come, is rightly described as father, as the origin and the source of life, just like our own human fathers are the origin, the first principal of the source of our human life, of our human nature, so too God the Father of lights is the one who gives every perfect gift that comes from above and in whom there is no variation or shadow due to change, so He's unchangeable. He is God Almighty, but He is also the one who is the creator of Heaven and Earth as we say in the Creed. So James goes on to say here:

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. (James 1:18)

So here what James is doing is drawing an analogy between the natural world, in which God is the author of natural creation. He gives us the natural fruits in their due season and that kind of thing, and also of supernatural life in which God, through His will, brings us forth:

...by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

So you see this agricultural imagery. It's going to be important throughout the letter of James, where James will draw analogies between the natural world and then the supernatural life of those who are believers in Christ. And in this case, he uses the image of the first fruits, the first harvest in the natural order — whether it's in the spring, for example, you give first grains of fruit in the spring. And he then draws an analogy between that and the first fruits of God's creatures in the realm of salvation.

So he's talking about salvation, but you'll notice it's very Jewish in the way he describes it. He's using the language and imagery of Scripture and also of the natural order. Now the lectionary there skips down after making that affirmation about how we have been given new life through the Word, through the Word of truth, to then emphasize that we must:

... be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. (James 1:22)

So here we see James, so to speak, sounding a theme that's going to be important throughout the letter — namely, the theme of good works, the importance of works that are done in Christ. And he is in a, so to speak, anticipating some people who might have an erroneous idea of the way the Word works. So is it just enough for me to hear and to have faith? No, he says. You have to be a doer of the Word and not just a listener, not just a hearer of the Word.

And here then the lectionary skips down again to which is really the kind of climax of the reading for today, when it says:

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. (James 1:27)

Okay, now there's so much we could talk about here, but this passage is really important because it's one of the few times in the New Testament that the word

“religion” is utilized. Now the Greek word here is *thréskeia*. It gets translated into the Latin Vulgate of the New Testament as *religio*. And if you go back and look at it in its original context, in the ancient Jewish Greco-Roman world, it has the connotation of acts of worship, often public acts of worship.

So *religio* or *thréskeia* could be used to describe different kinds of liturgical worship. So for example, Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus who writes in Greek — he’s a Jewish contemporary. He lives in Alexandria, so he’s a Greek speaking Jew — he uses the word *thréskeia* to describe Jewish acts of worship. Other pagan writers, like Dionysius of Halicarnassus, will use it to describe Roman acts of worship or pagan acts of worship. You will also see the term *thréskeia* used in early Christian writings, like the apostolic fathers, to describe Christian acts of worship — like 1 Clement chapter 62 or the Epistle to Diognetus. We’ll also see the term used in a negative context by St. Paul in the letter to the Colossians, where he talks in chapter 1 — I’m sorry, chapter 2, verse 18 — about the religion of angels, the *thréskeia* of angels.

Now there’s a debate about exactly what Colossians means in that verse. Is it talking about a religion? Is it talking about Judaism, which was believed, for example, the temple sacrifices were believed to have an analogy with the angelic sacrifices in the heavenly temple. Is that the religion of angels? Is it Judaism? Or is it actual worship of the angels, kind of illicit idolatry of the angels? Like when Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians 10, that the pagans — what they sacrificed, they sacrificed to demons and not to God. So Paul gives the impression there that pagan worship is in effect liturgical worship that’s being offered idolatrously to invisible creatures — namely, the unholy angels.

However, whatever it means in the passage in Colossians, the point is that in all of these examples, Jewish and Christian, as well as pagan, the word *thréskeia* or *religio* is used to describe liturgical acts of worship. So, when James, after having emphasized the importance of the word of truth, importance of doing the word and not just hearing the word, now brings chapter 1 to a climax by saying *thréskeia* or *religio*:

...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.

We see him correcting a lopsided notion of religion that would only put the emphasis on acts of worship to God and failed to emphasize acts of charity toward

one's neighbor. So he's stressing here that acts of charity — to visit widows and orphans in their distress — is an essential component of true religion. It's an essential component of true *thréskeia*, true worship. It's not sufficient — in other words, according to James, to simply praise and honor God if we fail to love our neighbor.

And so in that context, it's interesting here that James gives two dimensions to this true religion. First, it has to be characterized by acts of charity. So “pure and undefiled” religion is number one, “to visit orphans and widows” in their distress or in their affliction. But number two, it also says, it's:

... to keep oneself unstained from the world.

Now what does that mean? Well, throughout Jewish Scripture, you'll see “the world” used in both positive and negative ways. So “the world” can just refer to the created order made by God. We've already seen James use the image of creation, which is in itself good. At the same time, “the world” can be used — especially in the Johannine literature, but also in the letter of James — to describe the fallen nature of creation, which is often opposed to God, which is under the regime and the power of sin.

And so in this case, James is using it in the negative sense. “To keep oneself unstained from the world” means to keep oneself unstained from the *sinful* world, from the fallen world. So for James, true religion, biblical religion, has two components here that he's highlighting, but three implicit in the language of the word itself.

So first, *thréskeia* — it's the word connotes liturgical worship, acts of worship given to God. Second, it also connotes, however, acts of charity toward our neighbor, especially visiting orphans and widows, so care for orphans, care for widows — care for, in other words, for those who are powerless and who have no real power or influence in the world, who are vulnerable and marginalized like widows and orphans. Women who had no husbands and children who had no parents were very vulnerable, extremely vulnerable, in the ancient world and frankly, in our own world today as well.

And then third, what we might call holiness or sanctity — a negative understanding, to be sure, but one that's essential — basically, to keep oneself from sin, to separate oneself from the sinful aspects of life in the world. That is also religion that is pure and undefiled before God.

So we see liturgical worship, acts of charity, and the pursuit of holiness, of separating oneself from the fallen and the sinful elements of this world. So what's fascinating to me about this is that if you look at how religion is characterized, especially in our own day and time, you'll see there's always this — or should I say, there's often — a temptation to make Christian religion (and obviously James here is using the word religion about Christianity). It's not just the faith, although it is a faith. But it is also... it involves acts of worship, not just intellectual assent to certain revealed truths.

So what James is saying here, is he's recognized this temptation. Some people will tend to emphasize that true religion is about honoring God; it's about adoration to God. It's focused, so to speak, on the vertical relationship between God and humanity. You can think of the first three commandments, the first tablet — avoiding blasphemy, honoring the Sabbath, and avoiding idolatry. But then others will tend to emphasize the more horizontal dimension of true religion, saying, “No, no, no. True religion is about doing good to others. It's about loving your neighbor. It's about serving the poor. It's about serving the widow, serving the marginalized.” And of course that is true. You've got a whole seven commandments on the second tablet that's about that.

But James here wants to emphasize to his audience ... apparently they are being tempted towards the first half, to emphasize love of God, and they're neglecting love of neighbor. We're going to see that in just a bit in chapter 2 when the Church moves (next Sunday) into looking at the teaching of faith and works and some aspects of abuse of neighbor that were taking place within the liturgical assembly.

But in our day and time, it's interesting — I think the pendulum probably, at least in the west, has tended to sway the other way, where people will often say ... when they say things like, “I'm spiritual but I'm not religious.” What they mean by that is: “I try to be a good person. I try to love my neighbor. But I'm not religious, meaning I don't necessarily engage in public acts of liturgical worship.”

So it's very interesting that we see this terminology carried out in our own day, because when a person says that “I'm spiritual but not religious” in a modern context ... if what they mean by that is I try to love my neighbor, but I'm not really interested in loving God in the sense of any kind of public acts of worship, they're actually saying something that's true. They're making... there is some truth in that kind of self description.

However, James' teaching here — the New Testament's teaching — is that that's not sufficient. Neither of those is sufficient. It is not sufficient. True religion doesn't just involve loving God and ignoring a neighbor, as we'll see in chapter 2. But it also doesn't involve loving neighbor and ignoring God. It doesn't involve loving neighbor and not making any attempt to be holy, not striving for holiness — not striving to keep oneself unstained by the world. So when a person says, "I'm spiritual but I'm not religious," does that ordinarily mean that they try to separate themselves from the sinful aspects of the world? My experience is that that's not usually the primary sense that gets used today.

So in James' context, what he's trying to do is critique early believers who are overemphasizing love of God and underemphasizing love of neighbor. In our context, I think this is a fascinating text, because it can help us critique the opposite tendency, to overemphasize love of neighbor and ignore love of God. And it also provides a helpful corrective too, to those who would want to make Christianity only about faith, in the sense only about believing certain doctrines or believing certain truths. Not according to the New Testament. The New Testament says that Christianity is not just a faith — Paul's emphasis on faith is very important. It's not just belief or trust in God. It also involves *thréskeia*. It involves *religio*. It involves acts of worship toward God and acts of love of neighbor, so that we are not hearers of the world only, but doers of the word.

So I'm not the first person to see this. I'll close with a quote here from the living tradition. St. Bede the Venerable, who I've mentioned before in videos, he has a commentary — a very famous commentary — on the letter of James, where he highlights the nature of what James is describing here, in terms of true religion that's pure and undefiled before God. So this is in the early 8th century. St. Bede the Venerable says this:

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*.

So this is how Bede describes those two things. I called it liturgy and charity or acts of charity and holiness. He calls it mercy and innocence. Bede continues:

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.”<sup>2</sup>

So we see here, Bede, what he’s emphasizing is that another implication of the teaching of James in the reading for today is that we need to recognize that there are people in the world who are going to appear to be religious to others, because they go through the motions of making these public acts of worship. But that’s not sufficient. In order to be pleasing to God and to be religious in the eyes of God (not just in the eyes of others), we have to practice both innocence toward sin and mercy toward our neighbor.

So let us never forget that, that we need to be hearers *and* doers of the word, and that means not only honoring God through acts of worship that everyone can see, but honoring and loving our neighbor through acts of mercy ... and acts of purity and innocence that others may not see, so that we can live out a Christian religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father of lights.

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<sup>2</sup> Bede, *Commentary on James* 1:27; trans. David Hurst