

The Twenty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 35:4-7a
<i>Response</i>	Praise the Lord, O my soul!
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 146:6-7, 8-9, 9-10
<i>Second Reading</i>	James 2:1-5
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	And he went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 7:31-37

Hey everyone, welcome back to another COVID quarantine edition of the Mass Readings Explained. I want to thank you all for your patience with us as we continue to produce these videos in these difficult times. Today is the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time for year B, and we're going to be looking at another selection from one of my favorite letters in the New Testament. It's the letter of James chapter 2, verses 1-5. And here the lectionary gives us a short but very significant window into early Christian worship and early Christian teaching regarding love of neighbor — very key theme in the letter of James. So let's go ahead and just dive right in. James chapter 2, verses 1-5, we read these words:

My brethren, show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man with gold rings and in fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "Have a seat here, please," while you say to the poor man, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brethren. Has not God chosen

those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him?¹

Alright, it ends on a question mark. Okay, so what do we make of this passage here? A couple things I want to highlight. First, remember, as I've mentioned elsewhere, that the letter of James is one of the most explicitly Jewish Christian writings in the New Testament. So remember, most of the Pauline — or all of the Pauline letters, in fact — are written churches that consist primarily of Gentile believers, pagans who have become believers in Jesus Christ. And so Paul referred to himself as the “apostle of the nations” or “apostle to the Gentiles” or as one book that just came out calls it “the pagan’s apostle.” And that doesn’t mean there weren’t any Jews in Paul’s community. But they’re predominantly Gentile.

Likewise, the Catholic epistles of Peter, John, James, and Jude — these epistles are ... scholars agree, all the way back to the time of Eusebius, are recognized widely as written to predominantly Jewish Christian communities. And that’s one of the reasons they were actually — ironically, they’re called Catholic epistles, because they’re written to Jewish Christian believers who are living throughout the empire, as opposed to Gentiles in the Church at Corinth or the Church at Thessalonica or the Church at Philippi.

So that’s very important, because James here — if you look at James’ letter, he doesn’t have as much explicitly theological articulation of Christology and pneumatology like you find in Paul’s letters to the Gentiles, where he’s having to really lay out the basic elements of Christian faith. James tends to assume a lot and is focused more on ethics — what we would call ethics and moral theology. And in this case, in this passage in particular, he’s looking at the ethics of how Christians treat one another in the liturgical assembly.

So, his main point is that his readers are to:

...show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

Now if you notice there, James has a very high Christology. He’s referring to Jesus as the Lord of glory, which is a title found in other Jewish writings from the first

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.

century like 1 Enoch. It's used to describe God, but James is using it for Jesus Christ. But his point is not so much Christological as it is ethical when he's telling his readers to show no partiality toward one another.

Now the context of that is liturgical partiality. He's talking about how they treat one another in the liturgy, in their worship assemblies. And you can see that because he gives two examples here, two contrasting ones. He says:

For if a man with gold rings and in fine clothing comes into your assembly...

...you treat him kindly or honorably by inviting him to have a seat, whereas if a poor person comes in and they're wearing shabby clothing, you say to him:

"Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet"...

Meaning sit on the ground. So what we have here is partiality being shown to rich believers and against poor believers. So the rich believers are getting the good seats in the liturgical assembly, whereas the poor believers are having to stand or to sit on the ground.

Now, this is very, very important to notice this. Although the RSV here has, "if a man comes into your assembly," the Greek word is actually *synagoguē*. And there's a very apt English translation for *synagoguē*, and it's the English word synagogue. The English word synagogue is a Greek lone word. *Synagóge* - *su* means to come together, *agóge* means to gather, so it's a place where people gather together. It's a gathering place; it's an assembly. And it's the term that was used — along with some other terms — for public gathering places for liturgical worship in Jewish communities. That's what the synagogue was. It was a place where the Jews would gather to hear the Word of God spread, to hear it preached on by a rabbi or some teacher or elder, and then they would sing psalms and give worship to God — not sacrificial worship. That was reserved to the temple in Jerusalem, so they didn't offer passover lambs in the synagogue or anything like that. It was what we would call a liturgy of the word only. They would have the liturgy of the word in the synagogue, and the liturgy of sacrifice would take place down the highway or down the road (depending where you lived) or across the sea (if you were in the Diaspora) at the temple in Jerusalem on a daily basis.

So what we see here — this is very, very important. James is giving evidence that whereas in the Gentile churches of St. Paul, the earliest gathering places for the Lord's Supper and worship were in houses — like in Romans 16, Paul talks about churches meeting in people's houses. So you had these house churches. Apparently, at least in the Jewish Christian communities that James is writing to, they worship in the synagogue. They're gathering in the synagogue, and they're assembling there ... and some divisions were taking place amongst these believers, between the rich and the poor.

Now we actually see echoes of this already in the Gospels, because in Matthew chapter 23 — I'm sorry, Mark chapter 12, for example — Jesus rails against the Pharisees and the Scribes because they want the best seats in the synagogue. Jesus says:

“Beware of the scribes, who like to go about in long robes, and to have salutations in the market places and the best seats in the synagogues...

Mark 12:38-39. Now this is a very important point, because it gives us a little bit of a window into what synagogue worship was like. Apparently, there were seats in the synagogues (you can see that from James) and certain people had good seats — “the best seats” as Jesus refers to here — and to this day, that happens, obviously, in churches. Some people get the good seats at Mass; other people have not so good seats. And the best seats of all tend to be by those who are the elders and the clergy.

And so in Jesus' context, he may be referring there to the cathedra, the seat that an elder would sit on in order to preach from in the synagogue. It was kind of a seat of authority that represented the authority of Moses. But there are also multiple seats Jesus is describing. There are other seats that are being given... that evidently the scribes and the elders love to get the best seats in the synagogue as a kind of public display of their status within the community. And Jesus is telling His disciples to be aware of that.

Now, one of the reasons this is important, in terms of contemporary issues — and I've pointed this out elsewhere — I've noticed in recent last couple of years, I've seen several articles written on the Internet claiming that ... making some rather bold claims about the nature of seating in Christian worship. So you'll see — it's becoming more and more common — people say that there was no form of seating whatsoever in Christian worship until the Protestant Reformation, until the 16th century. So you see articles arguing that pews were invented at the time of the Protestant Reformation and that they really are kind of descended of the Protestant reformers, but that ancient Christians didn't have seats.

I'll show you in a minute why that's a problematic point, but just at the most basic level, it's really crucial to recognize that if you're going to make claims about ancient Christian worship, you need to begin with the New Testament, and you need to begin with ancient Jewish worship. And the letter of James and the words of Jesus in the Gospels make clear that there were seats in the synagogue — otherwise the Pharisees couldn't choose the best ones. And the words of James make clear that there were seats in early Christian liturgical assemblies ... which would make sense, because the earliest Christian liturgical assemblies are taking place (in Jewish Christian circles at least) within synagogues as James chapter 1 makes clear. He actually calls it a synagogue.

But just for your information, if you want to look into this a little bit more, there's a Jewish scholar, Lee Levine ... published this book. It's called *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*. And in that, Lee Levine writes — you see it's not a small book, it's pretty exhaustive — he writes this:

[B]enches and columns... are among the most ubiquitous archaeological findings... Many, if not most synagogues apparently also had wooden benches or mats in addition to the fixed stone benches.²

So if you look at ancient archaeological excavations of synagogues, you're going to see that a lot of them have benches — stone benches, kind of like more permanent benches — along the walls, but then there's also evidence (Rabbinic

² Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (2nd ed.; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005), 337

evidence) that there were wooden benches or portable benches as well and even mats for sitting on, that varied from synagogue to synagogue.

So what Jesus is describing here, and what James is describing is that in early Christian worship, the idea of Christians being seated, presumably, to hear the Word is the most likely place —scenario — is something that was part of early Christian worship. So when you see those articles, be wary about sweeping claims about ancient Christian worship, because the New Testament bears evidence to the contrary.

Now, with that kind of ancient context in mind, what is James'... James' ethical point here is real simple, is that when it comes to Christian worship, there shouldn't be any distinction between members of the faithful who are coming in. In other words, you shouldn't give the seats to the rich people and the floor or the standing room only to the poor, because, as he says:

Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him?

So you'll see this equalizing force within early Christian writings. Paul will talk about it elsewhere too, like in Galatians 3:28, he'll say:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

What he doesn't mean there is that there are no more social distinctions at all within life in the world. Men are men, women are women. Gentiles are still Gentiles, and Jews are still Jews. And the system of slavery unfortunately was very much a part of the Greco-Roman world — who was a slave and who was a freeman? But what Paul is saying is that in Christ, those barriers and those distinctions are going to be broken down, and all are going to come together and be one in Christ. And in no place is that clearer than in the liturgical assembly.

So what we're going to see James saying here is that if someone comes into your liturgical assembly, and you're treating certain members of the laity — what we

would call the laity, the people, the faithful — one way because they're rich and others another way because they're poor, you're actually acting as a countersign to the Gospel itself. Because Christ the Messiah is going to be poor. He's going to be a poor, Jewish son of a poor, Jewish carpenter. And yet He's also going to be the king of Israel. And then that sets a standard for God's preselection — His preferential option, you might say, for the poor ... that He chooses the poor in the world to be rich not in wealth (material wealth) but to be rich in faith.

Jesus will say this too in Matthew 11, in his famous cry to the Father:

... "I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes...

So the wise and the learned, the scribes and the scholars who are exalted ... they've been blinded. They can't see clearly, but the poor and the fishermen and the humble and the lowly may not dress so well, they may not smell so good (think about the fishermen), God has chosen them. He has chosen them to be heirs of the kingdom that He promised to those that love Him.

So charity is the real defining factor of who's rich and who's poor — spiritually rich or spiritually poor. And James is emphasizing that, that we have to strive for not earthly riches but spiritual riches, and that those who are earthly (in terms of earthly) rich but spiritually quite poor. And then there are those who are poor in the world — here's another use of "the world" that James will say — but rich in faith. So beautiful, beautiful exhortation in James chapter 2.

Now a couple of interesting points about the living tradition here. Let me give two quotes from St. Augustine, because I recently was talking to someone about this question of seating and worship in James chapter 2. And they asked me, "Well, what about Christian worship?" It's one thing to have ... Jewish worship might have had seats in the assembly, but what about ancient Christian worship?

Well, it's diverse. We have clear evidence that in some places, Christians did not sit while they gathered in the liturgy for the Eucharist and evidence in another place

that Christians did sit. And the best evidence I've gotten for this — kind of clear and succinct evidence — comes from St. Augustine of Hippo. Sorry for all the tabs; I love this book. This is Augustine's *On Catechizing the Uninstructed* with the title here *Instructing Beginners in the Faith*. Amazing, wonderful book on catechesis. If you're a catechist and you haven't read Augustine *On Catechizing the Uninstructed*, check it out. It's fantastic.

But in his book, in the course of teaching a deacon named Deogratias, who asked him about ... giving him some advice for instructing the faithful ... Augustine makes a mention of the distinction between the custom of the churches in North Africa, where people stood during worship, and the churches in Italy, where they were seated during worship. Listen to this, fascinating. He says this:

Another way to meet our listener in his need is to offer him a seat... In certain overseas churches [=Rome] there is a far more prudent practice: not only are bishops seated to address the people, but seats are available for the people too. Thus it can be avoided that a frailer person, worn out by standing, would be distracted from his highly salutary purpose or even forced to leave.³

So that's the quote from Augustine. So notice what Augustine says, it's really interesting. He says that in Hippo, where he is in North Africa, the custom is to stand during worship. But he likes the Italian custom of not only the bishop sitting down to preach, which is very wise — and if you're a teacher, we have this custom of standing while we teach. It's very exhausting. The ancients knew better. Sit down, and teach sitting down ... just like Jesus does in the synagogue. He reads the Scripture and then He sits in order to preach, because He preaches from the chair. It's a symbol of his authority from the cathedra. You can almost define that, translate that in Latin as *ex cathedra*, from the chair. That's an ancient Jewish custom, to teach and preach from the chair, *ex cathedra*.

So apparently both in North Africa and in Italy, the bishop preaches sitting down. He sits when he addresses the assembly. But Augustine says the laity are different.

³ Augustine, *On Catechizing the Uninstructed* 13,19; trans. Raymond Canning

In North Africa, the laity stand. But in Italy they sit, which presumes they have to have some kind of seats, whether they sit on the ground ... or more likely, they have some kind of benches or what we would call pews.

Augustine likes the Italian practice precisely because it fosters attentiveness on the part of the laity. He says those who might be frail or weak — think here the elderly or mothers with children — can get worn out by standing, and they'll tend to get distracted during the sermon, during the homily, rather than attentive. And they might even leave church if they get tired of standing up, especially for Augustine's sermons, which could often be quite long by our standards today.

So very interesting passage there, just about seating in the assembly flowing out of James chapter 2. And then the second passage and final passage here from the tradition is more on the meaning of James' words. Listen to what Augustine says. This is from his *Confessions*, book 8, 4.9:

Far from me is the notion that in your tabernacle, Lord, the rich should be more highly regarded than the poor, or the noble than the less well-born. You have chosen the weak things of this world to put the strong to shame, and you have chosen things which are dishonorable, despised and of no account, in order to bring to nothing the things which are.⁴

Beautiful imagery there. So notice, Augustine takes the words of James, and what he says here ... he describes Christian worship as entering the tabernacle of God, like the portable tent of worship in the Old Testament. And he says, in that tabernacle, Lord, there is no distinction between rich and poor, between noble and lowly born, precisely because:

You have chosen the weak things of this world to put the strong to shame, and you have chosen things which are dishonorable, despised and of no account, in order to bring to nothing the things which are.

⁴ Augustine, *Confessions* 8.4.9; trans. in Gerald Bray, p. 22

Like the kings and emperors and princes and courts. All that is going to come undone in the Christian in the liturgical assembly where we worship the man, the Godman, the One:

...who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant...
(Philippians 2:6-7a)

... so that we might be saved and so that we might be exalted. So in light of that, there should be no distinction ever — according to both James in Scripture and Augustine in the tradition — between the rich and the poor in the Christian assembly.