

In the preface to his 1522 translation of the New Testament, Martin Luther famously refers to the Letter of James – from which our second reading today is taken – as a “straw-letter,” or an “Epistle of Straw,” as it is more often called. What he meant by this comment has been the subject of scholarly conjecture and debate for centuries and will probably remain so for some time to come. Because we are part of a world-wide communion our lectionary readings along with the Roman Catholic Church and other churches mean our readings are set and give us the Letter of James in parts over the 3 year cycle. No sermon series here on St Paul’s Letter- its the privilege of being a part of something bigger- and better!

But no matter how you look at it, the Letter of James is indeed a bit of an oddity in the New Testament canon. One commentary notes, for instance, that Jesus is mentioned only twice in the entire letter and then rather perfunctorily. Little in the letter is specifically Christian, and much of the text is given over to advice and exhortation, not unlike that found in the Wisdom Literature of the Hebrew Scriptures – the Old Testament – or perhaps even the New Age literature of our own day. Thus, the letter has remained more or less an anomaly and on the back shelf of scripture study for centuries.

Luther was likely most discomfited by the letter’s seeming emphasis on human wisdom and common sense – doing the right thing, we might call it – works, in other words, as opposed to faith. In James, it almost seems sometimes as if salvation could indeed be won by our own efforts and action without the Cross of Christ, which is tellingly not mentioned even once in the entire letter. Luther’s misgivings may have been justified.

Yet the truth is that most Christians of any age – in spite of what scripture tells them and us about the importance and centrality faith – remain firm believers in works. We are all “Jamesians,” to coin a phrase. Deep down, most of us believe in salvation by works. We readily judge others by their deeds. Ask most any Christian today how they plan to get to heaven, and they will readily tell you that it is by trying to lead a good life and helping others. By works, in other words. Few will first cite their faith in the loving mercy of God and in Christ’s redemptive death on the cross. Meanwhile, we all want to get ahead in the world – perhaps not unlike the disciples in today’s gospel account.

Asked by Jesus what they were arguing about along the way, they are at first silent but then sheepishly admit that they were contesting who among them was to be the greatest – who would achieve the most. There are probably few better examples in scripture of the allure of works and their presumed rewards over faith and its illusive promise than this telling admission from the closest followers of our Lord. No wonder “they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him,” when Jesus spoke of his impending death.

Perhaps the disciples just did not want to hear about it. Likely in their effort to become “the greatest” they were more comfortable matching good deed for good deed with their fellow disciples – as if the spiritual life were a sport or competition – rather than in thinking about the depth of their faith in our Lord, much less in his Cross, about which at this point they admittedly had only an inkling.

Anyway – they may have thought – how would you even measure and quantify faith? Surely, it is easier to count good works and keep a running tab. Perhaps it would be better for them, as some in our society today seem to advocate, to become totally self-reliant and ruggedly individualistic Apostles – with a

capital “A” – than childlike and humble servants of all, concerned only for the needs of those less fortunate. Still, as the medieval theologians remind us, faith builds on nature.

You have to start somewhere. And at some level, we all begin with works. For most of us, including the disciples, this means somehow taming our own base instincts for self-defeating and self-destructive behaviour. Where, in other words, do “conflicts and disputes” come from, James asks. Precisely from the “cravings” that are at war within each of us. That which comes from heaven, on the other hand, is in James’ words “peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.” Human wisdom left to itself, James concludes, is too often “boastful and false to the truth” – seeking, not unlike the disciples, self-aggrandisement and recognition – to be the greatest.

He may not have been a great theologian like Paul – or Luther for that matter – but James has a common-sense grasp of the dynamics of the human heart. Works or no works, he appreciates that we must first “resist the devil ... and draw near to God.” We must do something. It is only then, he seems to tell us, that God will ultimately “draw near” in turn and approach us with the gift of grace and redemption. Christ draws near us in his death and resurrection.

Our gospel account reminds us of this reality in our Lord’s own words to his sometimes clueless disciples. “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him,” he tells them and us, “and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” For Christians today, rising with Christ still means dying with him to self and “selfish ambition,” as James calls it.

It means finally putting all of our faith in the only “works” that matter: Christ’s own death and resurrection.

In defining greatness through this living example of a child, Jesus is providing the disciples with three valuable lessons about walking the Way of Love. First, we learn the importance of changing oneself to serve. Here, we find that Jesus’ definition of greatness requires a transformation grounded in humbleness. Not just humility, but the humbleness of a child.

Secondly, we learn how to live out the humbleness in community or organised life. Jesus uses the example of children not as an invitation to innocence and naiveté but a challenge to relinquish all claims of power and domination over others. This was a profound shift in the societal context of the disciples. It is equally provocative for these contemporary times. Appeals to greatness that reinforce domination and dominion over others run counter to Jesus’ teaching and example.

Lastly, Jesus’ invocation of the children as the example of greatness reinforces the inherent value of children and other people who are most vulnerable, least seen, and unheard. The context of Jesus’ world and ours continues to warrant valuing actual children. His embodied word to the disciples serves as a clear example of Jesus underscoring integrating actual children as full members of the community and our community. What does it mean to proclaim Jesus’ good news – “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me” – if the Church fails to meet the concrete needs (I hasten not wants) of actual children?

It is in changing ourselves to be like children and embracing Jesus’ invitation to be the “last of all and servant of all” that we live into a Christ-centred greatness. This of course as we know is not what our society really models. Oh the talk, pretence and humanitarianism. But we know the walk is so different. Our times invite us to also reorient the compass of our lives, and, in doing so, reimagine our

understanding of “true north” towards Christian service. We therefore have to integrate the words of Jesus into our lives and choose a definition of greatness centred on faith in His death and resurrection and then in quick logical consequence Christ-like service in the world.  
Amen.

Fr Robert Newton