

The Fifth Sunday after Easter - Rogate

Hymns: 298, 297, 314, 189

The INTROIT

(Is.48:20, Ps.66:1,2)

- P: With the voice of singing declare ye and tell this:*
C: utter it even to the end of the earth. Hallelujah!
P: The Lord hath redeemed His servant Jacob:
C: Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
P: Make a joyful noise unto God, all ye lands;
C: sing forth the honor of His name.

The COLLECT

O God, from whom all good things do come, grant to us, Thy humble servants, that by Thy holy inspiration we may think those things that be right and by Thy merciful guiding may perform the same; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

The FIRST LESSON

Jeremiah 29:11-14

For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end. Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart. And I will be found of you, saith the LORD: and I will turn away your captivity, and I will gather you from all the nations, and from all the places whither I have driven you, saith the LORD; and I will bring you again into the place whence I caused you to be carried away captive.

THE GRADUAL

(Lk.24:26; Jn.16:28)

- P: Hallelujah! Hallelujah!*
P: Christ, who hath redeemed us with His blood:
C: is risen and hath appeared unto us. Hallelujah!
P: I came forth from the Father and am come into the world:
C: again, I leave the world and go to the Father. Hallelujah!

The EPISTLE

James 1:22-27

But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed. If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

P: Hallelujah! Christ, our Passover:

C: is sacrificed for us. Hallelujah!

The HOLY GOSPEL

St. John 16:23-30

And in that day ye shall ask me nothing. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you. Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full. These things have I spoken unto you in proverbs: but the time cometh, when I shall no more speak unto you in proverbs, but I shall shew you plainly of the Father. At that day ye shall ask in my name: and I say not unto you, that I will pray the Father for you: For the Father himself loveth you, because ye have loved me, and have believed that I came out from God. I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and go to the Father.

His disciples said unto him, Lo, now speakest thou plainly, and speakest no proverb. Now are we sure that thou knowest all things, and needest not that any man should ask thee: by this we believe that thou camest forth from God.

James 1:22-27 — “Beholding His Natural Face”

INTRODUCTION

I. BEHOLDING HIS NATURAL FACE

II. BLESSED IN HIS DEED

III. IF ANY SEEM TO BE RELIGIOUS

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James 1:22-27 — “Beholding His Natural Face”

Grace, mercy, and peace to you all from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

The appointed Epistle reading for this Fifth Sunday after Easter is James 1:22-27:

But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed. If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man’s religion is vain. Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

Today’s text demonstrates that James was a very, very deep theologian and that he expected and even demanded the same of his hearers. On the surface, to the untrained ear and mind, this text sounds very different than what James actually says and teaches. This text is for well catechized Christians, for in it St. James demands faith that draws upon the deepest and greatest treasures of Holy Scripture. In this text St. James expects a full understanding of the means of grace as THE means by which Christians live and have their life.

I. BEHOLDING HIS NATURAL FACE

But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was.

St. James speaks of the very deepest understanding of true faith and theology, that is, knowledge of God. He warns against being self-deceived or self side-worded. He warns against accounting ourselves as having right and true faith while not being made doers of word but only hearers. He warns us in the plural, as a congregation, not to side-word ourselves regarding the engrafted Word which is able to save our souls. He draws this together with the comparison to one who looks into a mirror, beholding his face, going his way, and forgetting what manner of man he has been.

It is notable that James first addresses us in the plural, as a congregation, and then in the singular, with regard to how we view ourselves. He warns us as a congregation not to forget that we are a gathering of those who share in the same singular identity. When we are to observe ourselves as individuals, we are to behold the exact same reflection as each other member of the congregation. We are to see the reflection of one who is baptized into Christ crucified.

This is why James precedes this text with the words of verse 21, cautioning us saying, **“Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.”** Where is the filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness laid aside from us? Where do we meekly receive the engrafted Word, which is able to save our souls? Is it not in Baptism that these miracles are worked for us?

Truly, St. James is directing us to return continually to our baptisms, which is One Baptism into the One Lord, One Faith, One God and Father of all of us. This is the glass or reflection into which we are to look to see the new identity that God places upon us with His own holy name. In the reflection pool of the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit (Titus 3) we see the Righteous One abiding in us. There we see the face of the natural man, or as James actually writes, the face of the generation of him.

Truly this is Baptismal language. This is what we are not to forget as a congregation and as individual members of the body of Christ. This is what James means by addressing us as doers or makers of word and not hearers only. If we merely hear what is declared in our baptism and are not actually changed by God’s declaration of justification and sanctification concerning us, then we have side-worded ourselves. We have merely heard the word as beside us and outside of ourselves and it is no longer engrafted into us. For the engrafted Word is not idle, but is lively and powerful. The engrafted Word produces that for which God sends it to accomplish.

And what does this powerful and living engrafted Word accomplish? It works the saving of our souls. And how does it do this? Here we learn that St. James is in complete accord with St. Paul, who writes to the saints in Rome:

But the righteousness which is of faith speaketh on this wise, Say not in thine heart, Who shall ascend into heaven? (That is, to bring Christ down from above:) Or, Who shall descend into the deep? (That is, to bring up Christ again from the dead.) But what saith it? The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart: that is, the word of faith, which we preach; That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed. (Romans 10:6-11)

Through the engrafted Word, faith is planted in the heart so that the baptized believe the salvation that is in the Lord Jesus Christ, who by faith, lives in us. This same engrafted Word, that is, this same Lord Jesus Christ, produces by this same faith that He works in us, the true confession of this faith that we confess together in the gathering unto the pure Word and Sacraments. This is what James tells us we will be doers of. We will be doers of the Word that lives in us, if indeed we have not merely heard the Word as something beside us or outside of us.

As those in whom the Word is engrafted we will be drawn together both to hear this Word and to confess it in the one true faith. It is for this reason that the Creeds of the Church

have been handed down to us, so that our confession of this Word is truly the same confession as the apostles taught. This is why we gather together, calling upon the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, falling to our knees to confess our poor miserable condition that we have according to our own thoughts, words, and deeds, hearing the words of absolution and rising to confess the thoughts, words, and deeds of the LORD, who is our God and Savior. In the liturgy and in the creeds, we speak with one mouth, one heart, and one mind, the theology of the new man who is regenerated in Baptism. Then, continuing in this doing of Word, the doing that the Word has worked in us, we do not walk away forgetting the reflection of the man that we saw in the holy water, not forgetting the man that we have been made to be in Christ.

II. BLESSED IN HIS DEED

But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.

This is amazingly deep theological language. Yet, nevertheless, it is as pure and simple as it can be. Nothing is easier. Nothing is as effortless. But this is true only for the person who truly observes the perfect law of liberty. A more direct translation is helpful in understanding this.

But the one having looked into law of completeness, the one of liberty, and having side-continued so, not a hearer forgetful having become, but a doer of work, this one blessed in the doing shall be.

Truly, Baptism is the law of completeness, for in Baptism we are made complete again in the image of God. That which has been lost to humanity on account of sin is restored through the law of Baptism. The Law, which shows us the holy will of God, shows us that by our own works we are never complete. The Law always shows us that we are not complete but are missing that which we need to be truly like God. But in Baptism the Law is carried by the Lord Jesus and fulfilled completely for us so that with the Word saturated water we receive His completeness. His image is poured over us so that we have a new image, the image of God as our new skin, our new robe of righteousness. This is truly a law of liberty, for it sets us free from the bondage of our own miserable attempts at righteousness and goodness and binds us instead to the works of God in Christ.

This is why James tells us that when we look into the law of completeness, the law of liberty, and continue standing beside our baptism, not hearing what God declares in our baptism and then forgetting His gracious words as we continue in our daily walk, then we live as doers of God's work, the work of the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit. Then we live as those who are blessed. James declares this as **"this one blessed in the doing shall be"** because it continues into the future. While Baptism itself is a one time event, the doing of what God has worked for us in Baptism continues to be worked forevermore. And this is our sanctification. The good works that God has worked for us in Christ Jesus are applied to us and we see His good works produced in our daily lives. More and more we see what God is working in us and as we observe ourselves partaking in God's good works we are blessed. For this is the life that we cannot work for ourselves, yet, by God's grace, we find ourselves doing those very things that are impossible for us. God works in us so that these are the doings produced in our lives and we are blessed in the doing of them. More and more we discover that these are truly God's works that He credits to us. We come together confessing our miserable sinful nature and God declares us righteous through the absolution of our baptism so that we go home justified and

living in the sanctification of God's holy name. More and more we observe the completeness of this sanctification as God's works are worked in our daily lives. More and more we observe that He truly has set us apart from the world. More and more we observe that we are truly abiding according to the law of liberty. More and more we observe that we are truly free to live in the works that God has worked for us. More and more we observe that we are truly blessed in the doing that the Word does in us and for us.

III. IF ANY SEEM TO BE RELIGIOUS

If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridled not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

James actually says: **"If any thinks religious he is in you, not bridling his tongue, but deceiving his heart, of this one empty the religion."**

Many people think themselves to be religious, but do not bridle their tongues. Many people think themselves to be religious, but do not continue standing beside the law of completeness so as to bridle their tongues from wandering this way and that way. The Apostles' Creed is often referred to as the Baptismal Creed. It is concise and yet quite detailed. It is very carefully written to counter the false doctrines that people dream up for themselves. It directs our hearts back to the waters of Baptism, where we see ourselves and our thoughts, words, and deeds washed away to be replaced with the engrafted word that is able to save us.

Those who think themselves to be religious are not singular in their manner of unbridled tongue. The bridle of the true unity of the Church seems to be restrictive to them. Some imagine themselves to be religious because they strictly adhere to various churchly traditions, but they count their observance of these traditions and confessions as the basis of their religiosity. And so they preach and confess about Jesus Christ and Him crucified, but they do not actually preach and confess Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Rather, they preach and confess their works of preaching and confessing. This often seems hard to distinguish, but it is not really hard at all. The true preaching and confessing of Christ is one of true unity. It always produces the works of the engrafted word. As James declares, it manifests itself in the visitation of the fatherless and widows in their affliction and in the keeping of oneself as unspotted from the world. Those who are truly confessing Christ see to the true catechization of those who have been robbed of their heads of households by death or divorce or abandonment. They do not seek to continue in the communion of a church body that is not truly united, but keep themselves unspotted from the world, continuing in the holy communion of the saints and not in blended communions. Those who are of pure religion remain separated by the engrafted Word, separated unto the pure Word and the pure Sacraments, not becoming spotted again with the blemishes from which Christ has cleansed them, but continuing as those who have been made to be doers of Word and not merely hearers.

In a similar way of self-deception are those who imagine themselves to be religious by denouncing religiosity, as if somehow there were something false about being religious. As James says, they also deceive their own hearts. In fact, they make a religion out of being irreligious, all the while claiming themselves to be better worshipers of Jesus. They certainly do not allow their tongues to be bridled. They invent something new every day, or at least so they imagine. In reality, there is nothing new about their inventions, for their inventions are really only cheap imitations of what the world does. The fact is that they really are worldly through and

through, smearing some religious sounding catch phrases over their worldliness so as to have some religious appearance. They completely set aside the bridle of the tongue, making up their own confessions and their own improvements over what the apostles inherited from Moses and the Prophets and from Jesus and handed down to us.

There are other ways in which people imagine themselves to be religious while not bridling their tongues. People imagine themselves to be religious as they seek to change and transform the world for Christ, something that Christ expressly denounces. He says that His kingdom is not of this world and that His Church is not to seek to change the world but rather is to stand apart from the world and to call sinners to be separated from the world. And so people exert themselves endlessly in trying to change the world and to shout down those who partake of certain sinful activities.

James warns us against thinking of ourselves as religious without bridling our tongues. He warns us not to put our tongues to wagging about how religious we are, thereby deceiving ourselves. For he says, **“Religion cleansed and unspotted this is: to oversee orphans and lacking women in the pressures of them, without spot oneself to guard from the world.”**

Clearly James is directing us to Baptism by referring us to religion that is cleansed and unspotted. By this he directs us away from looking to ourselves as religious, but rather to look to the means of grace. He directs our hearts away from our own works, away from our own acts of believing, away from our own attempts at sanctified living, away from trying to change the world, away from trying to reach out to the world, and back to the means by which God works for us and in us to make true believers of us and to sanctify us and to change our hearts and to reach out to us and to restore us into His Holy Communion. He directs us away from thinking about ourselves so that the office of the keys is our only concern. He says that religion that is in connection with and produced in us through Baptism leads us to look away from ourselves and to the needs of others, so that those who are most ignored by the world, those who have the least to offer anyone, are the ones over whom we look. The word for oversee is *episkeptomai*. It means to *over-scope*. It means that the pure religion produces in us such concern for others that we scope them, like when using a microscope, to discover even the tiniest needs, especially the spiritual needs but also the bodily needs, of others. This is a very attentive examination. It is one that requires considerable investment of time and effort and energy. It also is one that produces no easily detectible gains. It also is a venture that will not lead one to become spotted with the world.

CONCLUSION

This is what one sees when one looks into the reflection of Baptism without forgetting what is heard. This is what is meant by the admonition to be those who are made to be doers of Word and not only hearers. This is what the Word works in us through the means of grace. In Baptism the Word comes to us and enters into us and engrafts Himself in us, filling us up with His grace, mercy, and peace, filling us to such a point that our own miserable thoughts, words, and deeds are purged from us. In Baptism the Word and the Spirit take up residence in us, making us living members of God’s temple. In this way we are set apart from the world to live in Christ. He produces in us the faith by which we have the new life that He has purchased for us, and that faith does what it believes. That faith looks back to the reflection of Christ in Baptism and lives in accord with what it sees. The Holy Spirit continually calls us back to this reflection, and we then come forward to eat and to drink the meal of forgiveness and renewal. Thus fed we give thanks continually for this miracle that God continually works in us. Walking in His mercy, His grace shows in us and in our lives. We look beyond to those around us, seeing

them with the same compassion with which God looks upon us. His love moves us to love. His love moves us to act in love. His activity transforms our activity. His holiness drives out our worldliness. And because the Holy Spirit continues to work in us, we count none of these things as our own doing, but rather we trust the doing of the Word and abide in His doing. Thus we are truly free, free to live and to work with a clean conscience, a conscience cleansed in Baptism and renewed and strengthened in God's Holy Communion. Truly we are and ever shall be blessed in the doing of the Word among us. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.