

Reflection for Liturgy of the Word
Monday Feb. 17, 2020
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Today's readings are instructive for us regarding how we are to be and not to be. The letter from James is considered to be one of the earliest letters emerging from the early Christian community. The author bears witness as one utterly convinced that Christianity is the Way. There is no wavering in his certainty regardless of the trials, sorrows or challenges in life.

James sets forth the "how" of navigating hardship by persevering through "wisdom, prayer, and faith" – those God-given gifts bestowed generously when asked for with absolute confidence. The importance of not doubting is crucial in this letter. For James, to doubt is to be like a "wave of the sea that is driven and tossed about by the wind." We are counselled to be anchored so that our life circumstances, whether impoverished or steeped in wealth and security, are not the essential importance. Externals are always subject to change as we are acutely aware. What is essential is what we hold fast to in faith especially when undergoing hardship. It is our absolute and unwavering belief in God that empowers us to patiently endure the trials that can serve as a "spiritual discipline" to help us mature in our life in Christ. There can be no place for doubt in this. We are called to "consider it all joy" – a very hard choice to make when in the midst of suffering, but a courageous act of faith nonetheless.

Then we have this very short but powerful Gospel from Mark. Doubt is featured prominently in the Pharisees who again test Jesus to the point of exasperation.

They want a "sign from heaven" so that they might have a reason to believe. They personify what James admonishes us not to become – people who have to have everything proven concretely before they will believe. So who are these Pharisees anyway? Biblical scholars reveal them to be a reform group in Judaism trying to revive religious observance by making some of the purity rules reserved only for the Temple a part of daily home life. Some of these beliefs and customs were similar to those of Jesus and the early Christian community. The Pharisees formed the "largest and most influential religious-political party in New Testament times." The name Pharisee means "separated one." The Pharisees separated themselves from society to study and teach the law, but they also separated themselves from the common people because they considered them religiously "unclean." (Zevada)

They were also middle-class businessmen and trade workers who started and controlled the synagogues – the meeting places for local worship and education. They placed great importance on oral tradition making it equal to the laws written in the Old Testament. The Pharisees are depicted as being "extremely accurate and detail oriented in all matters pertaining to the law of Moses. In critique, they were said to be sound in their professions and creeds, however, their system of religion was more about

“outward form then genuine faith.” For them, the way to God was through obeying the law. They were a prominent influence in the gradual shift in Judaism from a religion that practiced ritual sacrifice to a legalistic religion of keeping the commandments.

Jesus appeared to threaten the Pharisees by not holding fast to this legalistic adherence to the laws. He rebuked them for the burden they placed on the common people. In the Gospels of Matthew 23 and Luke 11, Jesus chastised them soundly and called them hypocrites. He compared them to “white-washed tombs, which are beautiful to behold on the outside but on the inside are filled with the bones of the dead and unclean.”

Here we come back to a consistent challenge by Jesus to the Pharisees: what is in your heart? Where is your love? This rift between Jesus and the Pharisees and the uplifting impact it had on the common people caused a desire among the Pharisees to destroy Jesus’ influence among the people, and this becomes the basis for their ongoing challenges to him. Their goal in testing him by asking for a sign was not intended to confirm their faith, but to confirm their disbelief. The Pharisees tested Jesus with malicious intent and in disregard for the many signs already given. Jesus is anguished by their disbelief, gave no sign, as signs are for those with eyes willing to see, and he further rebuked them by leaving.

So today’s readings summon us to examine our depth of faith. To look at what we nurture in ourselves in order to see and believe. We are called to be people of wisdom, prayer and faith – deep faith. There is no greater urgency for this than right now! “Deep faith. Courageous Spirit. Action for Justice.” Beyond all doubt this is the way we are called to live and love.

Resources:

The New Interpreters Study Bible
The Gospel of Mark – Lectionarystudies.com
Learnreligions.com
James1 – An Exegesis by Richard H. Schleicher