

'Favouritism in the church: A flowering of sin'

Grace be with you and peace from God, our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ

Take strength from the grace of God which is ours in Christ Jesus. – 2Tim.2,1

Collect:

Almighty God, you call your Church to witness that in Christ we are reconciled to you. Help us so to proclaim the good news of your love, that all who hear it may turn to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen

There is none holy as the Lord,

there is none beside Thee;

neither is there any rock like our God,

there is none holy as the Lord.

Gary Garrett © 1976 Scripture in Song

Reading: **James 2, 1-13**

Sermon:

Dear friends

When Jesus was travelling to Jerusalem and was approaching Jericho a blind beggar shouted after him saying, '*Son of David have mercy on me!*' But as he was doing that, the people round about him told him to be quiet and leave it alone. That is interesting! Because, why did they do that? Why did they try to stop him from seeking an encounter with Jesus, the man everyone there knew to be a friend of sinners and losers and, moreover, a miracle worker? Did they not want to see what would come next? But the thing was, they took issue with the beggar calling Jesus '*Son of David*'.

What they took issue with was the idea that the *Son of David* – the promised king of Israel whom God would install in Jerusalem! – could be seen as someone who would condescend in help to the

wish and ways of this miserable beggar who, presumably, was afflicted by God for his sins! Some there objected because they didn't believe that Jesus could be this king, and others objected because they didn't feel it was right to expect the king to single out this beggar – of all people! – for special attention!

But Jesus' response was one that sought to prove both kinds of objections wrong. And it wasn't just to make this point that he turned to the beggar and healed him, but also to give his followers an example that would make it clear to them that such shoving aside of a poor person was not on.

In fact, not long before this incident there was another, where people brought their infants to Jesus for him to bless them. And there also, the disciples immediately got busy trying to prevent it. "Don't do that! Can't you see that Jesus, the master, has better and more important things to do? Don't you understand that this is not part of our mission? Do you not get that his attention is better spent on the deserving, on those, that is, who can be expected to further the cause? These little ones are no loss to the kingdom, so don't bother the master!"

What about Jesus? He was indignant and wouldn't have it, saying instead: "*Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, (you say they are no loss to the kingdom? I say) the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.*" (Mk.10,13-16) And again, besides receiving the teaching they were meant to understand that he was giving them an example, to do as he did – not shove aside, not pass by, not send away empty, but care.

Now, James turns the light on this kind of thing as he continues to trace the path of the faith to which the church is called. And what he calls attention to is a kind of favouritism in the church which results in giving preferential treatment and honour to the rich while the poor is shoved to one side. This seriously distorts faith and life, because it leaves some people victims of discrimination and it reflects evil judgments.

Let us look into this mirror that is held up before us here, not as foolish people who don't want to hear and immediately forget, but as people who desire to hear, and to hear so as to do.

The illustration James uses to showcase favouritism in the church is very accessible and needs only mild adaptation, if any at all, to make us alive to the possibility of the sin of favouritism. Or do we claim that this is not or no longer an issue? That there is no thought in the church that some are worth attending to more than others? That there is no preferential treatment for the rich, and perhaps expected by them, for those who promise to be a greater asset for the church (or for one's friendship group, the Bible study, the steering group etc.)? That there is no discrimination between the more and the less deserving, no instances where the unpromising, the needy, the burdensome are treated as less honourable than the bright and promising, as though they couldn't be a loss to the kingdom even if they tried? Do we claim there are none who feel judged in the church, judged by thoughts that say "I don't care so much where you are", while saying to others "How good it is to have you with us!"

There is no need to go through various cases and scenarios of favouritism in the church. The point is to find what gives rise to it and prevents its demise, and what can help.

What is the thing, then, about favouritism in the church? James says that favouritism is a form of dishonouring those who receive less caring attention and are considered less worthy of honour because of their poverty, their plainness, their lowliness, because they are seen to be of less value and to have less dignity.

But what is the honour that is being disregarded in those who are overlooked or shoved to one side in favour of the more honourable and the more deserving? In the matter of favouritism in the church this is the crucial question and the answer to it is vital because it affects all areas of church life: It is the honour and dignity which rests in the fact that God has chosen *them*, that God has chosen what the world disregards and has withheld from the world the honour it demands for its own greatness and goodness, for those it loves. *“Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?”*

Here appears, I believe, the core issue in the troubling presence of favouritism in the church. It is the attitude (and thinking) that fails to really understand and grasp this choosing of God (incarnation!); the attitude that what the church gains by is not what God does to enrich the poor (sending His Son to die on the cross for the sins of the world and raising him from the dead, giving His Spirit, the Word I AM WITH YOU), but what the rich bring with them in terms of their assets, from what stands to their name, by just those things the world does to enrich itself and ascribes honour and dignity to. Of course, though we may hide this truth from ourselves, this attitude shows not only in the ways the church woos the rich, the influential, the big names, the movers and shakers, the ones with assets and exploitable skills, and welcomes them before those deemed unpromising, needy and burdensome; it shows prior to that in the regard we have for ourselves – that we think of ourselves, not as the poor God needs to enrich who cannot fathom why He would, but as those who know *they* are a gain for the church and the church must be glad to have them. As long as and wherever this is the case, favouritism will arise, it is simply the return or the abiding presence of worldly thinking in the church.

Do the test, says James, and see. Don't those whose approval and endorsement you seek though they reject what God has chosen bring their ways and their teachings to bear in the church? Are not those you say 'yes' to in the church and hold up in honour though it dishonours the poor (thinking that it benefits the church!) the same as those who in the world say 'no' to you and *“freely blaspheme the noble name of him to whom you belong”*?

Do the test and see if it is so. And if you do and find that it is so, then ask what the command to love your neighbour as yourself really means and whether what it asks of you is not this: not to discriminate, but to show mercy.

Dear friends, how does favouritism in the church cease? Surely we must follow James in calling it for what it is – a flowering of sin. And then seek to understand these words: *“There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent”* (Lk.15,7) If we truly realise the meaning of these words, we understand why good people so often reject the call to conversion, seeing no need for it in themselves since they do not in their own view share the unrighteousness of a sinner; we see that church recruitment and growth without repentance must fail to result in something that rejoices in mercy; we will understand that love – heaven's rejoicing! – is the fruit of faith coming through repentance.

Dear friends, there are among the discerning only two types of people: the repentant and the unrepentant sinner. The difference is one that affects all of life: It's that the repentant sinner is a vessel of what he receives by faith in Jesus Christ: mercy. And mercy triumphs over judgment, it is the victory of love.

AMEN

Lord God, we glorify and praise your name, for you have chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom you promised those who love you. The world is not worthy of those who belong to you and serve you. Give us, we pray a spirit of penitence over the ways that we in thought and in deed have favoured others and ourselves over any whom we regarded less worthy of honour. Be gracious to us and grant us so to understand the way of grace that we, not thinking more highly of ourselves than we should, may think the more highly and with love of our neighbour. Amen

- time of prayer / intercession – [what concerns we have on our heart we pour out before God and seek in thanksgiving the gifts of His blessings;
we ask to discern His judgments and for a spirit of understanding and repentance, for mercy and an end to the spiritual ignorance whereby we fail to reject and abhor sin and wickedness;
we plead for the lost, the broken, the lonely, the abandoned, the persecuted, the suffering...;
we think of the victims and the ongoing trouble of terrorist activities around the world and pray for those who put counter measures in place to keep people safe and for a spirit of reconciliation...;
we pray for the authorities and those in leadership, for our communities;
we thank God for His guiding and keeping, for all the ways in which we discern his helping hand;
we pray:]

'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen

Now may the peace of God which passes all our understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be among you and remain with you. AMEN
