

'Faith: Being and Having'

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

Let us love one another because the source of love is God. Everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God, for God is love. – 1Jn.4,7-8

Collect:

Almighty God, you have taught us that without love all our doings are worth nothing. Send your Holy Spirit, and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of love, the true bond of peace and of all virtues; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen

Jesus shall reign

- 1 Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
does His successive journeys run;
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
till moons shall rise and set no more.
- 2 To Him shall endless prayer be made,
and princes throng to crown His head;
His name, like sweet perfume, shall rise
with every morning sacrifice.
- 3 People and realms of every tongue
dwell on His love with sweetest song;
and infant voices shall proclaim
their early blessings on His name.
- 4 Blessings abound where'er He reigns;
the prisoner leaps to lose his chains,
the weary find eternal rest,
and all the sons of want are blest.
- 5 Let every creature rise and bring
the highest honours to our King;
angels descend with songs again,
and earth repeat the loud 'Amen

Words by Isaac Watts

Reading: **James 1, 9-18**

Sermon:

Dear friends

At one point Jesus says to his disciples, *'You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit.'* (Jn.15,16) Earlier he had put negatively what this implies so as to make it even clearer: *'Apart from me you can do nothing.'* (15,5) This is an extraordinarily focussed statement and one that is crucial for weighing up and understanding what God's Word is saying to the church through James' epistle. As we have seen this epistle is about the Christian faith in its active, "doing" mode, which is really the only mode. James' working assumption is that authentic Christian faith is known by its expression, and only if that expression is faithful and obedient to God's word and will.

Placed as faith is in a world which has other designs, faith is being tried and tested and exposed to many temptations. It is by standing and persevering in such trials and temptations that faith matures. There is much that desires to become faith's undoing and lead it off course, and this desire has strength. It is for a reason and with great spiritual understanding and concern that Scripture tells us repeatedly to watch and pray! This James' letter helps us with.

Now some such desire that can become faith's undoing arises from the circumstances, personal and economical, that we find ourselves in. James speaks of people being 'in humble circumstances' and of people who are well off and rich. Wherever we may be on the scale between these two, the point that James is making is about the danger that our attitude to our circumstances poses to faith and to Christianity.

In order to follow what he is saying – his method, by the way, is to apply Scripture! – we need to be clear what faith lives on, from where (or through what) it derives that quality of being a "doing thing" bearing the fruit that is love (Paul, Gal.5,6: *"faith expressing itself through love"*). Because it might be thought that the answer is *me*, as I am in myself responding to the word of faith: Who and what I am in myself (as *me*) responding to the Christian message – that makes faith a living, doing thing. But this is not so! Not what a person is in herself or has in herself, but what a person is in Christ and has in Christ, is and makes the crucial difference.

You see, here lies a misunderstanding of great consequence and one which I believe is quite common. (And James could be accused of not adequately guarding against this possible misreading of his own epistle!). The misunderstanding is this: Much reflection about faith, about Christianity, works with the notion (unbiblical as it turns out) that faith is something *I* do, that it depends on my power to self-determine what I will and what I do, and choose.

But this is exactly what Jesus warns his disciples they should not think, when he says, *'You did not choose me, but I chose you.'* They were to understand that had Jesus not chosen them, had they not had his choosing *done to them*, they would not have followed him nor could there have been the appointment to bear fruit. Does he not declare here that faith as a doing, living thing -authentic Christianity - is dependent on, lives on, his doing and his being? This is indeed one of the central insights into/about the essence of the Christian faith of those who were appointed to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is expressed, for instance, in this testimony of Paul, 2Cor.5,17: *"If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here!"* A creation is not self-made. And so faith is not about something self-made, but God-made: What I am through Jesus Christ and in him, what I have through Jesus Christ and in him, that is what makes faith what it is.

Paul lays this out pointedly in his letter to the Galatians when he says: *“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law (that is, if I could make myself righteous, if faith was something I could see to myself!), Christ died for nothing!”* (Gal.2,20-21)

It is from this vantage-point only of the grace of God, of what Jesus is and has done for us, that we can rightly perceive the danger to faith that arises from our circumstances and that we can understand the counsel of James to take pride in our high position if we are in humble circumstances and to take pride in our humiliation if we are rich.

What James has in view is our being tempted by our humble circumstances to forget and to let go of the knowledge of what we are in Christ and have in Christ by the grace of God: to focus in on what we are not and have not in ourselves as shown up by our personal and economic circumstances (“I’m not recognised”, “I’m not happy”, “I’m not gifted, not smart, looked down on”, “I’m not better than anyone”, “I don’t have this, that, and the next thing that I want”, “I don’t have independence or influence”) and to see the place of faith and God in the improvement of my circumstances/ of my circumstantial ‘self’.

And being tempted if we are rich by the wealth of our economic and social standing to forget likewise: to focus on what we are and have in ourselves, what gains we have secured, how we have been the makers of our own fortune, considering our wealth to make us rich and be the sign of God’s approval (“I’m recognised”, “I’m looked up to”, “I’m smart and have made my gifts count”, “I have the means, I have the power of wealth” ...), and to see the place and faith and God in the area of wealth management.

The thing about such a view – whether connected to humble circumstances that one wants to overcome or to wealth which one wants to pursue – is that it hides away what one is and has *in Christ*, with the result that faith from service to God is put to the service of one’s self. And that is the undoing of faith.

To avoid that James says to those in humble circumstances: *“Take pride not in what you hope will improve your circumstances but in the high position that is yours in Christ Jesus and is yours even now: child of God and member of His household, free from sin and death and every claim upon your life, destined to rule with Christ and inherit the earth, chosen to see God and enjoy Him forever, called through suffering to glorify God and in weakness to be made perfect.”*

And to the rich, to avoid the undoing of their faith, he says: *“You should take pride not in the wealth of your possessions and achievements, for they end in what they amount to – which is nothing. Take pride instead in knowing this and in knowing that you need God’s grace as much as the vilest sinner does. ‘Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight.’ (Jer.9,23-24)”*

Dear friends, whether our circumstances be humble or whether we be rich, let us examine ourselves with regard to the effect they have on our faith, whether what we are and have in Jesus Christ matters above what we have and are in ourselves. And let us guard against placing our pride and hope in ourselves, which shall be the work of grace.

AMEN

Lord God, we thank you for your gift of grace in Christ Jesus, that though he was rich, yet for our sake he became poor, so that we through his poverty might become rich. In taking away our sins through his death on the cross he offered his life to us and made over to us his righteousness. Now faith has in him the wealth from which it draws light, knowledge and truth. Guard us in the temptation to see faith's wealth in the things of the world and give us grace to delight in your kindness, justice and righteousness. In Jesus' name, 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 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
