

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost James 5:13-20

Some of the things James, servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, sets before us in what we hear today might make some of us to wonder. *Is anyone among you sick?*, he writes. *Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.* So is there some special power attached to anointing with oil? Will prayer and anointing with oil *always* save the sick? That can hardly be, can it? Well, we know that it isn't; quite a few Christians have died through the centuries, have they not? In fact, all have, except for that rather small portion of us who happen to have been born recently, relatively speaking.

Then there is the reference to *the prayer of faith*, the statement that *the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much*, and how Elijah prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. Is this meant to point us to a particular kind of prayer, different from the common prayer of common Christians, only available to especially spiritual people? Or is there a particular technique and method of prayer, or a particular formula, that will ensure that God will have to obey me and do as I tell Him?

Actually, it is really rather simple and straightforward, what James sets before us, and nothing other than what the faith itself teaches us. The tone of simplicity is set in the very beginning of what we hear today: *Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms.* And it carries through, also when James writes: *Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord;* in those days, this would translate into: *Is anyone among you sick? Let him be prayed for the way we do that.* And all of this goes to the tune that it is really not all that complicated. If you are troubled, pray. If you are cheerful, sing a joyful song to God. If you are sick, have your church pray for you. In general terms: live your ordinary life as the Church of Christ, and as His Christians, in which your sins are forgiven, and the love of God is upon you, and will make all things well for you; or: *Confess your trespasses to one another, as we hear it, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.*

Of course, what James, servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, has in mind is more than mere banalities, though. He does have a particular point to teach. And that point is that the things of God are *for real*, and that, as such, His Christians should take the things of God seriously, and take Him into consideration in all aspects of our lives. *Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. Is anyone among you sick? Well, then pray for him; what else would you do? And why on earth would you not?*

God should be involved in all areas of our life, and not as a last resort. I still smile remembering a grandson asking what was wrong, when he learnt that the Pastor had come by to visit his grandmother. The idea is common that there is no reason for the Pastor to come around unless things are really bad, and somebody is at death's door. And this reflects the notion, which is also common, that there is no reason to pray or otherwise involve God in things unless things are really bad. For that matter, I once heard somebody say that this particular person should not be prayed for in Church, because she was so old, and it was only natural and no wonder that she was not in the best of health and would probably soon die; as if God were only to be involved in things under exceptional circumstances.

And when God is reduced to a resource to turn to only in the most dire distress, that is when we forget that God is *real*; that is when all that we say and sing in Church becomes *just something we say*, not what we actually believe, and certainly not something we take seriously. The faith becomes *unreal* to us, and so does the obedience we owe to God; which is exactly the problem James, servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, deals with throughout his Letter. Then we come to think we can live and believe and behave as we please without taking the Word and will of God into consideration. We come to think that we are free to sin, to disregard the Word and will of God completely, and still call ourselves Christian, which is what the Letter of James teaches us is wrong, along with the rest of Holy Scripture. This is what James means when he so famously, or infamously, writes that *faith without works is dead*. If the faith is not something you take seriously in the way you live and believe and behave, then you do not *have* the faith; then you are not a Christian. It is as simple as that.

Therefore is it that James, servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, calls his readers, and all Christians, to take the faith seriously, not only occasionally, when things have become really bad, but at all times. For faith trusts in God in all things. Again, it is as simple as that.

Faith seeks all things good from God, and gives thanks to God for all things good. Faith turns to God in all distress. And faith trusts in God, that ultimately and in the end He will make all things well for those who believe in Him, and who, as such, by faith, belong to Him. For faith believes that, as James writes it earlier in his Letter, *every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.*

Therefore is it, also, that James, servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, does not go into all the questions pious curiosity might make us to ask in response to what we hear today, such as exactly why not all sick people are healed when they are prayed for, or which particular technique and method for praying will make sure that God will have to obey us and do as we command, and by which particular techniques and methods we can be sure to become a such especially spiritual person that God will do as we want. Such questions, born as they are of pious imagination, are ungodly and go against the faith itself. For in its very innermost nature, faith is to submit to God and surrender and entrust oneself to His good will.

True faith will not make you to seek to make yourself lord and master of your own life, or of your salvation, let alone lord and master of God. Sin in us is what does that, our belief in the ancient lie of the evil one, that we should be alike to God in knowing and judging and mastering good and evil.

Rather, again, the point James is making is that Christians should take the things of God seriously, and think of the things of God as real; and they will, in so far as they are Christian.

It really is quite simple. *Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms.* What else would you do? And why would you not? *Is anyone among you sick? Well, then pray for him; what else would you do, and why would you not, and try to come up with something else to do - unless you do not really believe in God, and do not take the things of God seriously? And if it is God's will, and what is good for the sick person, then God will raise him up from his sickbed, or his death bed. And if not, then that is what is good and right, or God would have done otherwise. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, and from Him come only good and perfect gifts, for God is God, and the one with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.*

And if God does not raise the sick Christian up from his deathbed, He will raise him up from his grave on the last of days, to a life far better than that to which he would have returned, had he been raised up from his deathbed. Yes, for *the Kingdom God has promised to those who love Him*, as James writes about it earlier in his Letter, it is not a consolation prize, not second best to this life of suffering and sorrow and sin rather, rather, it is a life far better.

Faith believes this, and takes it seriously, and knows of nothing greater and more precious, even at the deathbed, or at the funeral, than this: that God is good, and that as such, when His will is done, then all is well.

It is also a call to take the faith seriously, and the things of God, when James writes: *Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the Truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.*

Again, James reminds us of what the faith itself teaches us already, that nothing is more important than our eternal fate; not to God, who has given His most beloved Son over to the most severe sufferings for our salvation, nor to anybody else, whether they themselves know it or not.

And so, when someone wanders from the Truth, whether by living freely in disregard and disobedience toward the Word and will of God or by flirting with false teachings and beliefs, he or she is on the way away from the faith, and from his or her salvation, into eternal death and damnation. And it is not really rude or impolite, and certainly it is not *unloving*, to warn a such person of the danger he or she is in, and call him or her back; although, of course, it can be done in a rude and impolite manner, and even an unloving one, and should not be. If we take the faith seriously, we will know. And James, servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, reminds us.

But how do we make ourselves to take the faith seriously, then, and to be certain of our salvation, if we are not? James, servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, has given the answer already at the beginning of his Letter: *Receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.* In the Word of God of His love and what His love has done for us, His love is given to us, and lives in us. So live in that Word; hear it, and take it to heart. It really is as simple as that.

Now, to Him, whose power works in us and can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, be glory, in the Church and in Christ Jesus, throughout all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.