

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost James 3:13-4:10

A congregation can be a hotbed of gossip and grumbling, of quarrelling and bickering. Not all congregations are that, though, and certainly not all the time; but human nature being what it is, it often will not take all that much to break the peace and bring an end to harmony and Christian love. Sometimes, all it takes is a newcomer with zeal and talents to serve in the congregation and make the old guard to feel its position threatened, and to feel inferior.

It is against such rivalry James, servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, writes in what we hear today.

Where do wars and fights come from among you?, he writes. *Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?* They come from *sin*, in other words, from our desire for worldly glory, for honour and admiration, and for feeling good about ourselves and how good we are, and how much gooder we are than everybody else.

And from what we hear today, it seems that what occasioned James to write as we hear it today that he does was that there were some in the Church who saw themselves as superior Christians, more spiritual and spiritually enlightened than everybody else in their congregations. *Who is wise and understanding among you?,* he writes. *Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom.*

We know also from the Letters of his colleague Paul to the Corinthians, and particularly from the first of those, that this was indeed a problem in some churches: that some saw themselves as more spiritual and more enlightened than most, not because they were more familiar with the faith, but rather because of how familiar they were with false teachings. Apart from hearing the Word of God preached and taught in their church, they would also follow preachers and teachers of different religion on the side, and learn from them, also, and what they learnt outside of Church would be what they *actually* believed. And because they had *greater faith*, that is: more faiths than one, they would consider themselves more spiritual and enlightened than the common Christians in the congregation, who only embraced the faith of the Church. In truth, of course, these superior Christians were actually the *less* enlightened. They could not tell the difference between Truth and falsehood; which means that they were actually *not* all that enlightened.

They did not see that by embracing beliefs foreign to the faith, they were actually abandoning the faith; it was just that they *knew more*, they thought, and knew better. And as such, they did not have to listen to the Apostles when they spoke against false teachings, or to their own Pastors, given to them by God to learn from; nor did they have to care about the common Christians in their congregation or their concerns about having communion with false religion imposed upon them when those who followed false preachers and teachers would pretend to belong to their faith and their church and even actually *commune* with them.

It seems to be a similar form of self-seeking and self-gratifying and self-aggrandising spirituality James is warning against in what we hear today.

Who is wise and understanding among you?, he writes. *Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the Truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. As does his colleague Paul, James contrasts worldly wisdom, that is: imagined wisdom, with that Wisdom which is from God. The Wisdom that is from above is first pure, he writes, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now, the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.*

The Wisdom that is from above is the Wisdom of God; actually, it is God Himself, the Son of God, who is God Himself from eternity, and the eternal Word of God, and His Wisdom, by whom all things were made.

And He who is Himself the Word of God, and His Wisdom, He comes to us in the Word of God, of how God in His Wisdom, has brought His eternal will to completion by having His Son suffer for the salvation of sinners.

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, the holy Apostle Paul points out that to be really *spiritual* is to live in this Word, that is: to hear the Word of the cross, through which the Spirit of God lives in us with His own life, rather than to please the human spirit by seeking exotic and exciting experiences and insights into visions and revelations and angels and demons.

James, servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, goes another way; well, actually, you could say that he does not, since the way he goes leads to a conclusion that is really the same; but we shall get to that. James, servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ calls to *repentance*.

Adulterers and adulteresses!, he writes. *Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. To set the Truth of God aside to please the world, and to satisfy that in yourself which is of the world, is to make yourself an enemy of God. As James writes it: This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there.*

Therefore James calls his readers to *repentance*; to turn away from the spirituality that pleases human nature and seek instead that which is from the Spirit of God, and take the Word and will of God seriously. *Or do you think that the Scripture speaks in vain, he writes, when it says that He yearns jealously for the Spirit He has made to dwell in us? Well, it is not. God wills for those going off from the faith into idolatry and ungodliness to return to the faith He once gave to them.*

And true repentance is not only to turn away from ungodly outward behaviour; it is also to turn away from all worldly wisdom, which, self-seeking and self-gratifying and self-aggrandising as it is, is of the evil one. First and foremost, true repentance is to return to the Wisdom that is from above, that is: to return to *the faith* and seek God in the Gospel alone, in His Word of salvation, by which His Spirit lives in us with His love and His life.

Therefore is it that James also writes: *if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the Truth; do not be defiant against the Gospel, that is, which is that to which James points us. As we hear it today what he writes: But He gives more grace; God does, that is. Therefore He says: "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.*

This call to repentance is a call, not only to repent here and now, but, in fact, to live in *constant* repentance, in the Word and worship of God and His salvation, and so constantly to have our sin forgiven and constantly be cleansed from all guilt and debt and impurity, and be made heirs anew, ever anew, to His Kingdom and His heavenly life.

Submit to God, as James writes it, as we hear it, and: Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. This is the true spiritual warfare; not the mind games false preachers and teachers teach their fans and followers to make them feel like spiritual superheroes fighting dramatic battles with demons, employing fanciful spiritual techniques, but rather to wage war against evil and ungodliness in ourselves. Truly to resist the devil is to submit to God and to His love, as His love shines upon us in the Word and worship of His salvation.

For with His Word of His salvation, of His love and what His love has done for us, God Himself dwells in us and works in us with His love, and with His salvation. As James also writes it, *the Wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now, the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace; by those who make peace with God, that is, by hearing His Word of salvation, and taking it to heart, and surrendering to His love.*

It is interesting, is it not, since some would have us think of the Letter of James as a contradiction to the writings of his colleague Paul, how similar all this is to what Paul writes: *Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the Truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all thing.*

Such is the love of God, which comes to us in our Lord Jesus, who is Himself the eternal Word of God, and the Wisdom of God, and which He gives to us and works in us, with His Word of the Wisdom of God, and His love, how God, in His Wisdom, has brought His eternal will to completion in the sufferings and death of the Son for the salvation of sinners.

As is the case with the writings of Paul, the heart of the Letter of James is the *Gospel* rather than the *Law*; what James calls his readers to do is not to *behave* as much as it is to *believe*, to look at themselves and acknowledge their sinfulness, and seek salvation anew, ever anew, in the Word of God of His salvation. As he writes it in his first chapter: *Put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted Word, which is able to save your souls.*

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.*