

Easter 4

I take as my text today, from the Epistle of St. James:

Every good and perfect gift is from above, and cometh from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

The Epistle passage today comes from St. James, the James who was the head of the early Church centered in Jerusalem, not the Apostle James who, according to the Acts of the Apostles, was put to the sword by King Herod.

This St. James, the author our Epistle, was considered the first Bishop of Jerusalem, perhaps consecrated by Peter, John, and James the Apostle.

What little we know of James is that he is called the brother of the Lord, called brother because there was not a word in Aramaic for cousin. He was also referred to as James the Just.

James was well respected by the Jews of his time and was not only the leader of the Christian sect but was also a leader among the Jews. He was considered an Orthodox Jew and worshipped in the Temple daily.

James' end came in the year 62, when he was accused by the Jewish high priest, Ananas, or Ananas ben Ananas, of breaking the law, and teaching that Jesus was the Christ. Ananas took advantage of a period between Roman procurators to try to eliminate a number of leaders of the Christian Church.

Ananas was considered to be rather ruthless, was one of the leaders of the Great Revolt of Judea in 66 A.D. and was killed in 68 A.D. during an inter-rebel civil war. He was considered by Josephus as an *effective speaker, whose words carried weight with the people.*

Keeping up with the succession of High Priests of the Temple during the first century until the Temple's destruction is not without its intrigue.

James was taken to the pinnacle of the temple, where the scribes and Pharisees demanded that he recant before the people. Instead, James shouted loudly that Jesus was the awaited Messiah, who was crucified, and who arose from the dead, and ascended to the Right Hand of God. Enraged, the Jews threw James from the pinnacle to the ground and, as they began to stone him, he rose to his knees and asked God to forgive them. It was then that one of them took a club and delivered the final blow to end his life.

The accounts of James and his martyrdom come from several sources, including Hegesippus and the Jewish historian Josephus.

Thus ended James' rule over the Church at Jerusalem that lasted for 30 years, and had begun following the Passion of our Lord, when, as St. Clement of Alexandria says, James was made Bishop by St. Peter and St. John.

We turn, now, to the Epistle passage from St. James, where we are reminded of two great aspects of God: He is the source of good, and of good only, and He is constant and unchanging.

St. James covers a lot of territory in just a few verses, verses most likely written in the years between 45 and 49, a simpler time in the early days of the Church.

Though St. James' Epistle may appear simplistic in tone, the substance of the Epistle is based on one leading thought that underlies the whole and binds the various sections together. That leading thought is the central doctrine of the Old Testament, the Shema, ***Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord.***

James follows through with the theme that God is One, the only True God, and we, his children, made in his Image, must ever strive to be like him.

We are reminded that evil does not come from God, but, rather, from man. The gifts of God, whether of nature, providence, or grace, can only be good, and the spiritual gifts given along with Christ, spiritual blessings in him, reflect the perfect gift, that of righteousness, remission of sins, adoption, regeneration, and eternal life.

These gifts come from above, from God, and not from below, as from man's self.

We are further reminded that the ***good and perfect gift*** comes from the ***Father of Lights***. That is to say, the author of lights: of all corporeal light, such as the sun, the moon, and the stars; of all natural, rational, and moral light, as in angels and men; of all spiritual light; and of eternal light.

Moreover, God is constant and unchanging. James uses terms from astronomy to emphasize this aspect of God. He uses *parallage* for changeableness, and *trope* meaning the turn of the shadow.

The essence is that the sun in the firmament has its parallaxes, eclipses, and turnings, and casts its shadow as it goes through its daily and seasonal sequences; but in God, who is light itself, there is no darkness, no change, nor can he who is the Fountain of light be the cause of darkness. Here, the meaning clearly indicates the darkness that is in men, the evil.

Truly, God is light, the source of all good, constant, and unchanging.

God created us for good, and he has given us the *Word of Truth*, the Gospel to which we must be ready to listen and ready to receive. Yet, we must not be listeners only, but also doers.

We are called upon to be doers of the Word; to offer real and practical service.

James says, *we should be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.*

We shouldn't be all talk and no action. Neither should we allow anger to drain us of all energy to be doers.

From time-to-time, religious leaders, such as Martin Luther, have suggested that St. James in his Epistle stands in opposition to St. Paul concerning works versus faith.

As we all may recall, St. Paul's position is that we are saved by faith alone, not by our good works.

From St. James' point of reference, if we truly receive the Word of God, truly listen to his Gospel, then we are compelled to do good works; that is the mark of one who has accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

This does not stand in any way in opposition to St. Paul, who, while emphasizing faith over works, also concludes the inevitability of good works flowing from faith.

Paul is approaching the concept of faith and works from the very beginning point in the life of a Christian, while James is approaching the same concept from a point later in the life of a Christian.

The conclusion of both is that faith without works is dead.

If we are to understand the lesson from St. James, we must be willing to carry over into our lives our worship and love of God, so that it shows in our relationships with others, with the world itself.

We are called upon to put aside evil dispositions that blind the soul, hiding from us the engrafted Word of God.

The *engrafted Word of God*: first, it is innate; it is within our nature. Perhaps, we could call it our conscience. It is an instinctive knowledge of good and evil that is in the human heart.

Secondly, it is a seed that has been planted in us, sown in our hearts, waiting to grow.

When we accept the Word of Truth, the Gospel, we are reborn into a new life, and become possessions of God. That rebirth is realized through Baptism, where we die to sin, and are risen up into a life with Christ.

It is Jesus Christ who is the Light of the World, the True Light, who lights up each of us who accept him as our Lord and Saviour, and fills us, through the Holy Spirit, with the Love of God, giving us Life here and hereafter.

Thus, if we accept the words of St. James, then, by our very nature, we should want to choose light over darkness; we should be ready to accept the Grace and Love of God that is freely given; and we should eagerly follow the innate guidance, that instinctive knowledge of good and evil, that dwells within our hearts.

That in itself is one aspect of the proof of God, the proof that God does exist. Planted within each human being is the instinct to seek God, whether we are willing to accept it or not. There is that innate desire to encounter our Creator, though there are some who would deny that predisposition, and go against the human instinct, to ignore and turn off that small voice calling from within, calling us to the Light.

James says that God begat us *that we should be a kind of firstfruits* of God's creatures. By that, we are a possession of God, being reborn through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As firstfruits were offered in grateful sacrifice in ancient times, we are sacred offerings to God through that rebirth, property of God, just as the first fruits of the harvest.

God is constant, never changing and his gifts to mankind are invariable in a changing world. It is God's purpose that all people should know they belong to him and are re-created through the truth of the Gospel.

James reminds us to be quick to listen and slow to wrath, so that we may hear with enthusiasm the Word of God, and may, unencumbered by the anger of the world, be energetic doers of his Gospel.

Strip off all filthiness and excesses of vice, James says. Strip off, as in removing soiled garments, and put on that inborn word which is able to save the soul.

Strip off and put on the inborn son of God. The inborn word, that instinctive knowledge of good and evil that is in the human heart.

That inborn word is reinforced by human preaching and teaching of the Word.

From the depths of our being, and from the Spirit of God within the Church, from within and without, we hear the voices telling us what is right and what is wrong, guiding us along the pathway.

But we must listen. Listen through prayer and meditation. Be still and listen to the engrafted Word of God.

Not easy in a world where we are bombarded every minute of every day, from every direction, with the worldly in every conceivable form.

Our refuge from the world is the Church itself. It is where we find shelter from the chaos of everyday living and a place for spiritual refreshment, indeed, refreshed with a heavenly banquet, comforted by the Holy Spirit, and united through Christ with the Communion of Saints past, present, and to come.

The Church is indeed our home and, in and through the beauty of corporate worship that awakens all our human senses, we are drawn ever closer to our Father in Heaven, and the Light that leads to eternal life.