

Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 1, 2024

St. James in his letter as we just heard is telling us to,

“Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves.”

In a certain sense, we know where he is getting to. He seems to be telling his readers, that’s you and me, that true faith is not simply a matter of what we believe. It’s about what those beliefs enable us to do, motivate us to do, inspire us to do. Because “pure” religion is not just “believing” the right things. It’s also about “doing” the right things.

And how do we make sure we do just that? James writes,

“Humbly welcome the word that has been planted in you and is able to save your souls.”

It sounds so simple. God speaks. We hear. We act. Easy-peasy. Yet, there is something implicit in James’ words, a “given” that might not always be the case. You see, it seems as if there is an assumption that we are all hearing the same thing, all receiving the same message, all listening to the same voice in the same way with the same kind of openness.

But is that true? Do we agree on what God is saying?

As Catholics we are called to “hear” God’s voice in many ways, but three major ones come immediately to mind. First, we are called to hear the voice within (the voice James was speaking of). This is our loving God speaking to us in the depths of our being and in the silence of our hearts. In fact our conscience is one manifestation of that.

Secondly, we are called to hear God speaking to us through our sacred texts. In particular, we are invited to hear and listen to Jesus - the Word made flesh, our God whose words and stories and actions and miracles

wash over us and edify us every time we seek to encounter him in the Sacred Scripture.

And, of course, we are called to hear the voice of our God speaking to us through the teachings of the Church, through those entrusted with making sure our faith gets passed on to us clearly and authentically and with fidelity.

Well, if that's the case, then why do . . .

Some well-meaning Christians almost always advocate for military "solutions", while other well-meaning Christians want to avoid war at all costs?

Some Christians believe we need to help the poor without reservation, while others believe that charity is basically throwing money at problems that are "unsolvable"?

Some Christians believe that contrition on the part of an offender is a prerequisite for forgiveness, while others believe in forgiving others no matter what?

Some Christians believe that people should live modestly and use their resources to better the lives of others, while others believe that it's perfectly okay and just to hold on to everything one has worked for?

Some Christians believe that other people need to get their act together, while others see a better world beginning with the improvement of themselves?

Some Christians treat every person as an individual, while others see categorizing and pre-judging people as "common-sense"?

Some Christians strive to be compassionate and understanding of others while some are convinced that people with addictions are "weak", people

who mess up are “bad”, other religions are “harmful” or “evil”, and that everyone “has an angle”.

I hope you see where I’m getting at. It appears that it’s not just a matter of us not being willing to do the things we know we need to do. It’s that too often we somehow seem to find a way to believe whatever we want to believe, hear whatever we want to hear, ignore whatever we want to ignore, and distort whatever doesn’t work for us. In other words, the reason we’re often not “doers of the word” as James calls it, is because we’re actually doers of our OWN word, crafters of a framework to live by that is completely of our own construction.

And so, we often “pray” already knowing what we want God to “say”. And we listen to stories in the Gospels that show radical forgiveness and mercy and generosity but convince ourselves that Jesus was just “exaggerating”. Or we hear him tell us to “love our enemies”, but somehow tell ourselves that Jesus knows what he’s saying is “completely unrealistic”. Or we hear Jesus affirm “outsiders” but presume that that no longer really applies to the modern world we live in. Or we hear our Church leaders teach us about all sorts of things, things meant to shape both what we believe and how we act, but somehow find a way to do what we would have done if they had never said a word on the matter.

And so I ask, - What is Jesus saying?

Sadly, he’s often just “saying” what we want him to say.

It’s as if our “faith” in other words, what we “believe” is our own playlist. No longer do we wait to hear what the next song will be. We’ve already decided. We’ve already programmed our minds. We’ve picked the channel. We’ve picked the genre. Often we’ve even picked the songs - the exact songs. And what we hear is precisely what we want to hear.

My dear friends, it’s not easy to do what we are asked to do in faith, it’s not easy to trust completely in the God who wants to speak to us, and

shape us, and motivate us, and transform us into the people he wants us to be. It's so tempting to simply embrace our own thoughts and attitudes and desires, and then try to find a way to make our "religion" fit those preconceived ideas, make the "message" we get from these sources match exactly what we wanted it to be in the first place.

Each of us our own authority.

Our own teacher.

Our own guide.

Our own etc

My dear friends, when we fail to truly listen to our God who is trying to speak to us, when we already "know" what we want that message to be, already know the "answer" (because it's OUR answer) we will never be able to live as God wants us to live. Our lives won't look anything like the lives God calls us to - lives in imitation of Jesus.

Rather, we will continue to do the wrong thing, we will continue to embrace all sorts of attitudes and actions that ultimately defile us, as we heard in today's Gospel passage from St. Mark, keeping us from being the best versions of ourselves, that is, the beautiful people the Lord knows we can be.

So my dear people of God, let's approach every encounter with our God with a clean slate (as best as we can), leaving our pre-conceived notions, our biases, our wants behind. Only then will we be open to all the wonderful things God has in store for us.