

Homily for the 23rd Sunday, Sept. 6, 2009

Intro: Today we have the second of five consecutive readings from the epistle of James. Of all the NT writings it is the strongest in its concern for the morality of Christians. The theme of the letter can be summed up in one sentence from last Sunday's passage: "Be doers of the Word, and not hearers only (1:22)." Against any false reading of St. Paul's doctrine of justification by faith alone, James insists that faith without works is dead. Today he develops what he had said last week that religion essentially must manifest itself in care for orphans and widows, the disenfranchised, vulnerable, and poor in his society. Today he warns us of our disrespect for the poor among us, of our harsh and hostile judgment of the poor. And so at the beginning of this liturgy, let us ask God in all honesty whether we judge the poor, or ignore them and their needs; whether we are willing to see them as God's children and an opportunity to serve Christ.

In a number of passages **Isaiah** speaks of God's renewal of the earth at the end of time. In Isa 29:18-19 the deaf will hear, the blind will see and the poor will rejoice. In Isa 35:5-7 the blind will see, the deaf will hear, the lame will leap, the tongue of the mute person will sing, and water will flood the desert. In Is 42:7 the blind will see. Through the messiah, God will create a new heavens and a new earth, and one feature of its newness is the reversal of present misery in the world, including blindness, deafness, poverty, and drought.

Mark now shows Jesus Messiah bringing in this new creation. Gentiles bring Jesus a deaf mute. Like most deaf people who cannot hear the sounds they are supposed to reproduce in their own speech, the man cannot form the proper syllables for speech. He has a speech impediment. Jesus takes him aside, puts a finger into his deaf ears, and with saliva touches his tongue. He turns to heaven and groans Ephphatha, "Be opened!" and at once the man's deafness is cured and he can speak properly. The pagans are astonished, and they publicize this miracle all over their land. But since they did not know Isaiah, they did not recognize the signs of the messiah creating a new heavens and a new earth.

The Meaning for us:

We Christians know that Jesus is fulfilling the prophecies of Isaiah about a new creation. All of Jesus' miracles manifest a new level of God's control over sickness and the forces of nature which threaten us. Jesus' teachings introduce a new morality made possible by a new relationship to God. Jesus' resurrection from the dead is God's triumph over our last enemy, death. And the outpouring of Jesus' own Spirit on Pentecost enables his disciples to speak in tongues and continue the same wonderful works that he did.

And yet we look at our world, filled with sickness, poverty, and warfare, and wonder if the new world has arrived. Why hasn't the Spirit of God abolished all these evils in a new heavens and a new earth? James tells us why in next Sunday's reading: "Where do the wars and where do the conflicts among you come from? Is it not from your passions that make war within your members? You covet but do not possess. You kill and envy but you cannot obtain. You fight and wage war (Jas 4:1-3)." The reason is that, although we have received the Holy Spirit of justice and peace, we prefer our world as it is---the greed which topples our economy, the violence of war as the first instrument of foreign policy, the consumption of our planet, the exploitation of women and children and infants in the womb. And we justify all of this by an appeal to sick and specious human reason---Rationalist "mankind come of age," divinized scientific technology, the autonomy of the market, national sovereignty. You can supply here your favorite perversion of human reason. We have what James has described--- faith without works, dead faith.

Today's second reading also offers a clue why the new earth has not appeared. Right in James' church the poor were kept in their place. Have we too come to think of the poor as those who deserve their poverty? Do we write them off as lazy, ignorant, drug infested---a host of reasons for not doing something to reach out to them, improve their position? Or do we think that these problems are too complex to have any solution? Of course we cannot and ought not put everyone on the government dole. Each of us is required to give of our wealth to the poor, and we are summoned to do this through larger community agencies like St. Vincent de Paul, Food Banks, UGN. But the government must also encourage the capital formation for new businesses to start and flourish so that these people can be employed in jobs with decent wages. Of course the means are complex, but we will not find them or develop them unless we have a change of heart.

As our Popes, and our American bishops, have been telling us insistently for many decades, we need conversion to Jesus and his values. First we must admit that we are wrong, that what we have created is not what Jesus gave his life for. Once we have made that step, then we can ask him to heal our deafness, give sight to our blind eyes, strengthen our lame legs, and raise us from the dead. And if we ask with a living faith that wants to move from passivity to the active works of justice and charity which lead to peace, he will heal us.

In Christ, God, has, after all, created a new heavens and a new earth.
BUT ONLY IF WE WANT IT.