



August 29th

THE NEW SHOFAR

Faith without works is not a genuine faith

Show me your works and I will show you your faith

Do not forget the things that your eyes have seen

A friend of mine told me recently how he had given up on going to Church because of what he saw as “failures in the ministry carried out by his priest”. To this he added, “I am now an ex-Catholic”. I then asked him the only question that could be asked at that point: “What about God?” He had become so worked up over what he saw as failures on the part of his priest, he was forgetting the very reason behind having a church community in the first place – giving praise and worship to God. If he was going to stop going to church; going to stop supporting its works then how was he going to continue to worship? Further to that, how was he going to fulfil his baptismal commitments to support and collaborate with fellow believers? For all of its manifold weaknesses and failings, the Church is still our spiritual family here on earth and it needs each and every baptised soul.

Judaism, from the start, was a complicated and law rich religious community and there was an abundance of excuses for infighting as they battled to interpret the Law in a changing world. It was at those moments the people were encouraged to pause and to look back at the many great and wonderful things their God had done for them and to look around and see the same great and wonderful things He was doing for them today. In celebrating those divine blessings, their divisions could be managed in love. Law is all well and good, but it only leads us so far in the way of worshipping God. It was never meant to be an end in itself. Religion is the same.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves

Those Christian communities, along with our Church today, struggled and continue to struggle with the same temptations. My friend was so absorbed by what he saw as being “failures” in priorities and directions that he had forgotten the many blessings that had come to that same parish, and to churches around the world since the day of the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Those perceived failures blotted out the light of God shining all around him and in his blindness he forget even God.

James comes out with a stunning rebuke of those churches who were beginning to fester with division and judgments. He was writing around the year 50 A.D. and already communities were struggling to focus on the essentials – preaching and witnessing to the world, proclaiming the Good News of the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth who was the Christ, the Messiah of God. As with every generation, it is always

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too easy to become entwined with the non-essentials and the cost is borne by our primary vocation.

For James, faith without what he calls “works” is not a genuine faith. It is a but a shallow surface belief system from which faith might well grow. Or, it may stagnate. He carefully defines faith when he says – *show me your works and I will show you your faith*. What he means there is – let’s sit down and explore the ways in which your daily living is transformed by your faith in a Living God, a transformation that will be evidenced in the way you live with others as brothers and sisters in Christ. If signs of this transformation cannot be seen in your words and deeds, says James, then your faith needs to be examined and your deeds challenged. Tough words indeed.

He offers an example of this when he goes on to offer one of the greater Christian applications of the teachings of Jesus on Love...*If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless*. What a simple example! If we *do not bridle our tongues* then we deceive ourselves and sin against God. The hurtful word, the unkind judgment, the words of gossip and condemnation – all indications of a faith that is sorely lacking in divine life and a faith devoid of grace. It all comes from a belief in personal superiority over others, a misguided comfort taken in my religious life over many years and a judgment that it is my way alone that is the right way.

This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me

Is this not the point Jesus was making in his battles with the religious leaders of Judaism: *You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition*. This is why *their hearts are far from me*. Because they are pursuing an agenda of their own making, deceiving themselves into believing it is the will of God. Look at their *works* says James; *don’t just listen to their words of prayer and praise*, says Jesus. There is much, much more to being a follower of Christ than Sunday worship in our parish church – though that too is very important to the life of the Church.

Our Covid faith challenge – being a Covid Christian

Living as a Christian during Covid is little different to living as a Christian in more normal times but it is a great deal more difficult because we cannot come together as the physical Body of Christ in this place. But there are hidden graces here as we have been offered time to prayerfully explore our own *faith-works*. We have opportunities to find time to delve into the Bible that will lead us in new directions; to explore ways of praying beyond that which is our usual style. We have been given time to discern (in the Spirit) God’s will for me and – this is where more works come into our Covid challenge – to show love others. There is a great Gospel challenge: by phoning friends, particularly our brothers and sisters in Christ who may be alone and struggling. We can take part in parish “on-line” activities and pray for all who find these times threatening. Covid is not simply a time of darkness. It is also a divine opportunity to give witness to the power of God’s love in times of struggle.

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