

We've been reading from the letter of St. James the last three weeks, and given that our Church bears the name *St. James*, let's clarify a few things. First of all, this letter was *not* written by our patron, the apostle known as St. James the Greater. There are no known writings of our St. James in existence, alas. So which James wrote this letter? The best guess is a man of the early Church who lived in Jerusalem and seemed to be a leader and spokesman of the early Jewish converts to Christianity. Most intriguing, he was apparently a relative of Jesus, often called "the brother of the Lord." This may mean a cousin, or potentially a step-brother from an earlier marriage of Joseph. In any event, he led the Jerusalem church for about 30 years until he was stoned to death by the Jews in 62 AD.

Even though this is called a "letter," it is not written to any particular individual or community. It may be better described as an exhortation, or a sermon, or what we may term an "open letter" today. The letter has many remarkable passages, with the most famous being the section we hear today. "What good is it, brothers and sisters, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?" This pointed question is answered a few verses later with the declaration: "...faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead."

I remember hearing this reading proclaimed for the first time when I was in college at Santa Clara. I'm sure I heard it earlier than this, but I had never heard it proclaimed by a Jesuit. The gauntlet was thrown down. The priest looked at all of us and said, "Is there any evidence whatsoever that you are a person of faith?" Prove it. Show me. I sat there dumbfounded, unsettled, and a little embarrassed. I had no answer. To me, being a Catholic meant going to church on Sunday, saying the occasional rosary, and knowing the Pope's name. I guess that isn't enough...

Another guy who had a lot of trouble with this letter was Martin Luther, but for a different reason. Luther was a scrupulous man who was plagued by doubts of his worthiness in the eyes of God. No matter how focused his prayer life, how often he gave alms to the poor, how often he attended Mass, he always felt that it wasn't enough. He was further bothered by the Church's emphasis on indulgences, the notion that one could escape the punishment of sin by doing something laudatory in this life, such as a pilgrimage to a holy place, or by reciting a special sequence of prayers, or best of all, by donating a bunch of money to the rebuilding of St. Peter's basilica. This felt all wrong to Luther – was God just an accountant in heaven? Luther finally found his answer in Paul's letter to the Romans, in

which Paul states that we are justified by *faith* first and foremost. This aha moment was pivotal for Luther, and he used it as the basis for his stinging criticism of Church practices 500 years ago.

So what's the right answer? Are we a people of faith or a people of works? Are Paul and James in contradiction? Actually, no, they're not. It's a matter of sequence. Paul has it right when we're looking at initial conversion. No person comes to the Father except through faith in Jesus Christ. Somehow, in some way, each individual receives an invitation from God through Jesus, through the body of Christ. Sometimes it's dramatic – a vision, a sense of the presence of Jesus that is physical; sometimes it's a moment, a song that brings us to tears, a word of comfort or consolation that breaks us open. Whatever the nature of the revelation, there is one thing that is common in all such aha moments. It is the absolute unmerited, unearned nature of the gift. One moment you're person A, muddling along through life, not really a sinner and definitely not a saint, and then, out of the blue, you're a shocked, stunned, teary-eyed, redeemed person B. What can you say? There's only one response, "Thank you, Jesus!"

Now we get to St. James. His letter assumes you've had that experience of Christ's love, that wake-up moment. His position now makes sense. If you simply wander around hugging everyone and saying, "Smile, Jesus loves you!" then you're missing a big point. Jesus knew that words were only impactful if deeds of healing and feeding and demon slaying and raising from the dead were equally present. So get your head out of the clouds and get to work! As St. James says, "...I will demonstrate my faith to you *from* my works." But remember, you don't have to do all of the work. As Mother Teresa famously said, "If you cannot feed a hundred people, then feed just one." Just one.

I was in the prison Wednesday night, leading a Bible study on these exact readings we just heard. As we discussed their meaning and potential impact on their lives, I was struck by two things. First of all, the discussion we had could have taken place in any living room in these parish boundaries. The insights, questions, challenges, and puzzled looks were those I've seen before. These men were only different to the extent that a major life mistake (or in some cases, mistakes plural) forced this discussion of God's word to take place behind barbed wire and guard towers. The second realization came soon after – the Spirit led me to the realization that many people, sitting in living rooms all across Del Mar, Solana Beach, and Encinitas are

just as imprisoned. How? Imprisoned by illness, imprisoned by 15 years of an empty marriage, imprisoned by depression, imprisoned by sadness over the death of a loved one, imprisoned by regrets and unfulfilled wishes. Chains are not always made of steel.

In this time of Church scandals revisited, and head-shaking revelations, and mystifying decisions by Church leaders, we're asked once again to answer the critical question Jesus asks each of us. *Who do you say that I am?* The politicians have their own answer, so does Hollywood, so does the Internet, so does your neighbor, so do the atheists. Feel free to hear their answers, but don't accept them as your own. Who do *YOU* say that I am? Your answer will invoke one of two responses from Jesus. He'll either say, "Get behind me, Satan!" or he'll say, "Come and follow me." Do you want to know what my answer to that question was, 17 years ago? Simple. Who do you say that I am? Jesus, you're the *chain breaker*. The next week, I was in the prison, helping to break chains.

The answer to that question is going to change over time. You know you have it right when the invitation to *live* that answer follows. You'll know your answer is wrong if the chains in your life are still intact. Answer the question. Be honest and open. Am I willing to lose my old life? Or do I want to continue where I am? Do I want to live in true freedom, accompanied by other good Christians with similar answers, people like you who have decided to demonstrate faith through their works? You'll never answer a more important question in your life. Who do you say that Jesus is?