



Reflection for October 21, 2020

The Feast of James of Jerusalem [transferred]

You must be doers of the word, and not only hearers who mislead themselves.

[James 1:22]

*How can I see your faith apart from your actions?
Instead, I'll show you my faith by putting it into practice in faithful action.*

[James 2:18]

Early Christian documents identify James the Bishop of Jerusalem variously as Jesus' brother, cousin, and half-brother. He is named "James the Just" because of the wisdom with which he negotiated between the requirements of Jewish Law and the adaptations necessary for building up a Christian community that included non-Jews. The Letter of James, attributed to him, belongs to what we call the Wisdom Tradition, writings that offer practical guidance on living faithfully in a culture where there are competing teachings.

This is the context for James' insistence that genuine faith is expressed through action, not simply through affirming doctrines. He does not teach that action *earns* grace—what is called justification by works; rather, he teaches that our faith is real only when we act on it, that action is a form of prayer, not parallel to it: *True devotion, the kind that is pure and faultless before God the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their difficulties and to keep the world from contaminating us.* [James 1:27] This premise was a way of navigating the conflict within the Christian community between Jewish religious authorities and those who proclaimed that Jesus was the Messiah as proven by the resurrection (which was the occasion for James' own conversion). The social action that James described was the ancient Law—care for the poor and resistance to corruption and greed.

Today, when we are bombarded not only with competing teachings but with competing versions of facts, James guides us to keep our focus on the single truth that all traditions share: We witness and experience the divine in our vigilant compassion for each other. Whether this involves wearing a mask or working at the polls, contributing to meals programs or taking time each day to pray, or all of the above: Each of us has one heart and one purpose during our brief time on this earth: to be an agent of God's grace.

*It was the flash of black among the yellow billion.
It was the green chink on the chapel's sphere
It was some trust or recalcitrance in us
By which we were by the grace of pain more here.
It was you, me, fall and fallen light:
It was that kind of imperfection
through which infinity wounds the finite.*

Christian Wiman