

(B26) SUNDAY 26 OF THE YEAR

(SEPTEMBER 19<sup>TH</sup>, 2021)

**Readings:** Numbers 11:25-29; Ps. 18 (19):7-9, 11-13; James 5:1 – 6; Mark 9: 38 – 43,45,47 – 48.

Most of chapters 4 and five of *The Letter of James* consists of teaching on particular moral or spiritual questions – the need for single-minded devotion to God, humility, refraining from judging our neighbour. Today's reading chooses only one of these subjects – the believer's attitude to wealth and to the poor. The teaching is so clear that there seems no need for commentary.

But the language of today's New Testament reading raises a theological question which is also raised by the teaching of Jesus in Mark's Gospel – it's the question of hell, of the everlasting punishment of the wicked.

James warns the rich: *Your wealth is all rotting, your clothes are all eaten up by moths. All your gold and silver are corroding away, and the same corrosion will be your own sentence, and eat into your body. It was a burning fire that you stored up as your treasure for the last days.* Note the similarity with the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:19 – 21).

In the Gospel Reading Jesus issues a series of stern warnings: - to those who write off someone else who doesn't appear to be *one of us*; to anyone who is an obstacle to *little ones who have faith*; and to anyone whose hand, or foot or eye leads them into sin. This last group is warned that it runs the risk of going to hell – the same fate of which James warns the rich.

To understand what scripture says about hell a little careful study is needed. First, the Bible uses more than one word which can be translated 'hell'. The Apostles' Creed says that after his death Jesus *descended into hell*: the Latin original means 'the underworld' – the place of the dead, to which the first letter of Peter says *he went to preach to the spirits in prison*.

The word translated 'hell' in the Gospel reading is *gehenna*, which is a Greek version of two Hebrew words meaning 'the valley of Hinnom'. This was a valley outside Jerusalem, which under the kings of Judah became the place for human sacrifice. It was condemned by Jeremiah and later became a city rubbish pit, *where the worm does not die nor the fire go out*.

Whatever the evangelist thought about the nature of 'hell', a careful reading leaves open for us the possible interpretation that the passage speaks, not so much of never-ending punishment for any individual, but rather of the permanent threat to all of the loss of life by the destruction of evil.