

Scripture Reflection September: St. James the Just.

In the Mass on Sunday, we have three readings: the first one is from the Old Testament (before the birth of Jesus), the second reading is from the New Testament: the life of the early church after the Ascension of Jesus and the third reading, when we all stand, is from the Gospels, which is one of the four versions of the life of Jesus.

September's second readings are all from the book of St James and its probably the earliest written document of the Christian community. Its written for all Christians not just to a particular group (e.g. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, or Galatians) so its called a universal letter. In fact, it is written in the style of one of the Books of Wisdom in the Old Testament. James, who is grounded in the Old Testament and sees the new Christian community as a fulfilment of all that was promised in the Old Testament, uses the format of the wisdom writings of old for his new community.

The Book of James, like most New Testament writings, was written in Greek because that was the universal language throughout the Mediterranean countries. This was a great advantage because it could be copied out and sent to across a large geographical area where the Christian community spread.

James' writings are significant to us as Christians because of all the disciples, James probably knew Jesus best of all. He was Jesus' cousin. He grew up with him from his earliest days and was reportedly so alike Jesus in looks he was like a twin! He understood his teachings and was entrusted to lead the first and most important Christian church in Jerusalem. St Paul calls him one of the "pillars of the Church".

The Book of James is like a handbook for the new community. It challenges values and attitudes: don't be proud, be kind, look after the weak and dying, be careful of what you say, put your trust in God not riches which can perish, don't oppress others, be humble, stand by your word. Do not be damning of others as God alone is judge. Much of the writing reflect the teachings of Jesus which are found in Matthew's Gospel, 5-9 "The Sermon on the Mount". Of course it is! He was there when Jesus was teaching it to the crowd. He was an eye witness to the life of Jesus and the writing reflects the teachings of Jesus we hear throughout the gospels. The Letter of St James talks of confession of sins and he is the originator of the Sacrament of the Sick. Most of all James emphasises that faith without good works is empty. Faith goes hand in hand with good deeds and is a reflection of the work of our loving God and father who loves us all.

James, like Jesus, was faced with life within a violent and precarious Roman Empire. His teaching is how to develop an interior spiritual life and perfect community where love of God and love and support of each other overcomes the evils of the world. We live in such a world today and the recipe here in the letter of James is still valid.

St James was lured to the pinnacle of the temple by the High Priest and told to deny the resurrection of Jesus. Instead, he proclaimed Jesus' resurrection and was then pushed to his death. He was beaten with a fullers' club and sawn into pieces. Pictures of him show the club, sometimes the saw and sometimes he is shown holding his book. St James' feast day is May 3rd.



"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble"

"Do not speak evil against one another"

"Show me your faith without works, and I by my works will show you my faith."



"The past is no longer yours; the future is not in your power. You have only the present wherein to do good." St Alphonsus Ligouri