

“Against Consumer Christianity” – Jas 3:13-4:3,7-8a

We were talking again in our Thursday evening Bible Study about how the pictures we have in our minds about Christ and things Christian are probably not very close to the realities they represent. The classic example, of course, is the image of Jesus brought to us by the David C. Cook Sunday School materials – along with many others of a similar ilk – helping us to indelibly imprint upon our minds a white-skinned, blue-eyed, blonde-haired (with maybe just a hint or tinge of red), kindly, smiling young man. Robes and sandals, tiny mud huts in dusty back country villages set the scenes in so many of those pictures. The only character I remember from those images who was dark-skinned, black-haired, and unsmiling was the villainous traitor Judas skulking malevolently in the background.

The pictures we have in our minds of the early congregations tend to be almost as far removed from reality as those we have of Jesus. I suspect if we were polled, most of us would describe the early church as comprised of small groups of gentle people meeting furtively in homes, sharing milk and cookies, listening raptly to the visiting minister, praying fervently, singing simple hymns with peasant gusto. Idyllic, pastoral-like scenes of gentleness, sharing, mutual interest, pure faithful devotion, grace and generosity abounding.

Interestingly those are not the kinds of pictures that dominate the epistles at least in the New Testament portion of our scriptures. We can fairly easily acknowledge that Paul in his letters to various congregations dealt with a number of issues that poke holes in the idyllic scenes I just described – issues of favouritism, factioning, gossip, and running after wacko false prophets. But here in our reading today from James we also see issue being taken with another serious problem that apparently had already risen in the early church. In this portion of James we hear strong hints that “bitter envy and selfish ambition” are causing troubles among the faithful, resulting in “conflicts and disputes among you.” James not only sees these conflicts and disputes as the result of the envy and selfish ambitions but also identifies surrendering to them as acting in ways that are unspiritual, earthly, devilish.

If we stop and think with some integrity about the developing church in the first one or two hundred years after Christ’s death and resurrection, it is not too difficult to see how the kinds of unspiritual actions that James is speaking against had arisen and were starting to create problems. As churches grew and power within the individual congregations and regions became tangible there would naturally arise those who wanted to grasp the power. As disputes arose as to the “rightness” of emerging doctrines and practices there would be those who would want to ensure that their brand or flavour of church and faith became the “official” version. And since ambition and greed seem to collide throughout human history it is not too difficult to hear in James’ words of admonition that greed was emerging in the churches to whom the letter is addressed. According to James disorder and wickedness of every kind result from such behaviour, leading to conflicts and disputes and even murder. That greed was becoming a significant factor is James’ powerful condemnation: “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.”

Wow! That’s a strong accusation. That kind of challenge, condemnation even, borders on being prophetic, echoing the classic Old Testament prophets like Amos, calling the people to recognize how they have strayed from what and who God was calling them to be. “You ask and do not receive ...” sends a strong signal that the people to whom James was writing were likewise falling away from God, and perhaps feeling it as well, for his closing assurance affirms that as they draw near to God he will draw near to them. One can almost hear the cries of the people asking, “where is God in all of this?”

One can hear those same cries today. Across nations who consider their Christian heritage to be an indelible part of their nationhood, who wave flags of nationhood interwoven with symbols of Christian faith, the same cry of “where is God in all of this?” rings out loud and clear. Especially in this past year, the first year following the collapse of one of the big financial firms on Wall Street, when the global economy shuddered, fell ill, and limped along on life support, we have heard that same cry from those who all their life had assumed that somehow God was on their side and smiled favourably on them in their faith.

In a way, I guess, we can’t really blame them. For several decades now it seemed as if “consumer Christianity” was working. Earnest and heartfelt prayers such as , “Dear God, please let me be able to buy a small house” came true for many people. Faithful people bought into the theology of “ask, and it shall be given.” The “life abundant” promised by Jesus came to be misinterpreted as abundantly filled with toys and goodies, enormous flat-screen TV’s and five-car garages. Just as the Consumer Price Index continued to escalate, so did the prayers, so that up until the bubble burst the demands in the prayers grew as well, for example, “Dear God, I want me that latest SUV.”

But people, as people do, forgot that along with a theology of “ask, and it shall be given” there is a call to focus on asking that is consistent with the call to “love justice, and walk humbly with your God.” The dream of being able to purchase a small starter home was pushed aside by visions of a third or fourth vacation property sprawled on several acres on waterfront somewhere. And when the economic bubble burst, as bubbles built on greed and envy and selfish ambition always do, the cries began to ring out loud and clear, “where is God in all of this?” The words of James here also ring out loud and clear, “you ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.”

So, am I saying that wealth is evil? No, not really. One could argue that since wealth is almost always derived through the oppression – economic and otherwise – of others that it is inherently evil, but we’re not going quite that far today. But here, like James, I’m echoing what Jesus also said, that it’s not the wealth that’s the problem, it’s the motivation behind acquiring and accumulating the wealth. Jesus said it rather eloquently, “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Mt 6:21). At the moment James is pointing us to reflect upon our motives, our base values, the forces that drive us in our faith. With gentle assurance James calls his audience, calls us, to draw near to God and in doing so God will draw near to us. For we who are Christians that assurance is a promise sealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, a covenant sealed in his body and blood that we are free to return to God, to draw closer to him, to be refreshed and renewed by him, and to receive the life abundant Christ promised.

How do we do that? How do we draw near to God? The answer is often best phrased by the prophet Micah, who in answering the question “what does God require of you?” responds with the simple to understand, hard to follow wisdom, “to love justice, and walk humbly with your God.” Love justice – is that not what James is calling faithful to do, through abandoning bitter envy and selfish interest? Is loving justice not lived out through ensuring that our personal and our corporate and our national interests, especially economic, do not trample all over other people, denying them the same opportunities for an abundant life? Is loving justice not also lived out through setting the strident voices of selfish interests aside long enough to hear the desperate and longing voices of the marginalized, the shunned, the hated, the despised, the lonely, the helpless? Is walking humbly with God not experienced through reflective awareness that perhaps, just maybe, we don’t have all the answers? Or that some of the answers we have are tainted by bitter envy and self interest?

And so we come full circle, returning to the question with which James opened this discussion, “who is wise and understanding among you?” For him this is not a rhetorical question, but is answered concretely by those who live out their faith with wisdom. It is clear that he believes the wise among you – among us – are those who exhibit a good life exemplified by works done with gentleness born of wisdom. Not a worldly-wise, super-clever, winner-take-all kind of wisdom, but a wisdom born literally “from above” (remember the discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus, re “born anew” which was a play on “born from above”?) a wisdom full of spirituality, filled with generosity, self-effacing, grace, and peace. Perhaps our first prayers should be that we may be granted such wisdom, that we may also be included in the “wise and understanding among you.” Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.