

(B24) SUNDAY 24 OF THE YEAR

(SEPTEMBER 12<sup>TH</sup>, 2021)

**Readings:** *Isaiah 50: 5 – 9; Ps. 114 (116): 1 – 9; James 2: 14 – 18; Mark 6: 7 – 13.*

Today's reading from the *Letter of James* does – unlike most of the book – raise a theological issue. It's one which has created tensions between different groups of Christians, namely the relationship between Faith and Works – that is between Christian conviction and Christian conduct. The Protestant Reformer Martin Luther called this book 'an epistle of straw' because it does not set out the doctrine of Justification by Faith, which he regarded as 'the article by which the Church stands or falls'. For Luther the essential thing was for a Christian to put his trust completely in God's promises. He based his teaching on statements like these in Paul's letter to the Romans: "*Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness*" (4:3), and "*The promise to Abraham and his descendants, that they should inherit the world, did not come through the Law but through the righteousness of faith*" (4:13). This complete trust is the faith required of a Christian: "good works" cannot take the place of this faith – they follow from it.

James, on the other hand, was concerned for the right conduct of a Christian, and he understands 'faith' in a completely different way from Paul (and Luther). In the verse which follows our reading (verse 19) he writes (as if to someone arguing that his faith will save him even if he's never done a charitable act) *You believe in the one God – that is creditable enough, but the demons have the same belief, and they tremble with fear.* It's clear that he is not speaking about the trust in God's promises, the 'saving faith' of which Paul wrote. He is speaking of giving the assent of the mind to a doctrine. To over-simplify we could say he is writing about believing that God exists, rather than about believing in God – putting our trust in him.

So the apparent conflict between this book and Paul's teaching in *Romans* is not a thing to be worried about. James is simply teaching us that Christian faith needs to lead to Christian conduct. What he says is not very different from the warning Jesus gives in the Gospel of Luke (13: 22 – 27) to those who find themselves shut out of the master's house: *You will begin to say 'We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets'. But he will say 'I tell you, I do not know where you come from; depart from me, all you workers of iniquity'.*

James teaches that faith is quite dead if good works do not go with it.