

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time Bb

When I was researching on what to share to you today, I came across a reflection that answers a long-standing issue for us Christians – the contradiction between what James has mentioned to us: “*faith without works is dead*” and of course, what Paul teaches us that “*we are justified by faith apart from our good works.*” In our second reading today, we encounter this apparent contradiction regarding a truth that is so relevant to our salvation. It has brought a major split in the Church and still continues to divide many of followers of Christ. One of the reasons for the split of the Protestants from Catholicism is Martin Luther’s interpretation of Romans 3:28, “*For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.*” He understood this as that we are saved by “faith alone.” He was so convinced of the importance of this viewpoint that he included the word “alone” in his translation of Romans 3:28, even though it is not in the original Greek text. However today in the second reading, St. James tells us that “*faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead*” (James 2:17). So how do we reconcile this apparent contradiction? To reconcile this tension, we need to ask ourselves two key questions. First, “What is *justification*?” Second, “What are *works*?” What is *justification*? Justification is the act of God in which sinners who confess their faith in Jesus Christ are declared innocent, as if they had never sinned. Justification therefore is a free gift from God. It comes solely from the grace of God based entirely on the merits of our Lord Jesus Christ. It happens at the moment when one submits in faith to Jesus Christ. In the early church, this conversion or change of heart was marked by the penitent receiving baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit. “Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). This shows us why baptism and confirmation are very important in our Church as Sacraments of Initiation because they are our personal, formal and sacramental way of accepting Jesus in our life. We only receive them once in our life.

How do we distinguish justification from salvation? Justification happens at the beginning of Christian life, salvation happens at the end of it, when the believer is finally admitted into God’s eternal presence. So for us Christians, justification is

already in the past, but salvation is yet in the future. This is the consistent picture we get from St. Paul. He speaks of salvation as a future event: "Now that we have been *justified* by his blood, we will be *saved* through him from the wrath of God (Romans 5:9). As such, we must not confuse justification with salvation. If we keep the two events apart, we see that God who justified us by faith alone does not save us by faith alone. We must bear fruit of good works so that we can be saved. What are *works*? Another source of confusion on the issue of faith and works is that there are two kinds of works mentioned in the letters attributed to Paul. There are *works of the law* (*erga nomou*), mentioned in Romans and Galatians and there are *good works* (*erga agatha*), mentioned only in Ephesians. What is the difference between *works of the law* and *good works*?

Works of the law are actions that are neither morally good nor bad in themselves, which one does simply to observe a law. Such actions include keeping the Sabbath or avoiding certain meats during the time of Jesus. In our world today, we could think of following traffic lights or driving according to the speed limit. Now *Good works*, on the other hand, are works that are good in themselves, which other people benefit from them, such as, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick. What Paul says as irrelevant to justification or eventual salvation is *works of the law*, not *good works*. *Works of the law*, not that they are not important, they are because they give us guidance how to live our lives well. But *good works* are necessary for authentic Christian living since, as James tells us, faith without good works is dead (James 2:17).

One of the biggest obstacles to the spread of the Catholic faith is the counter-witness given by Catholics who do not live their faith accordingly. India's great leader for independence, Mahatma Gandhi, famously commented on this phenomenon. He had been educated in western universities, where he was exposed to the beautiful teachings of Christ. But he was also exposed to the hypocrisy of people who called themselves Christ's followers, but made little effort to follow Christ's teachings. Reflecting on this experience, he later said: "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ" That's an example of dead faith, faith with no power to inspire or give hope. But

faith with works is alive; it does have the power to inspire and give hope. Mother Teresa of Calcutta was a great example of someone who expressed her faith through how she lived and what she did, not just through what she said. She won over to Christ many souls by her sincerity and gentleness.

Our world today desperately longs for witnesses of the faith. People who truly live the gospel, whose faith is alive and shown in how they live their life whether at home, at work and at any place they go. Explaining the faith is not enough, living the faith is what is needed in our world today. We have resolved the apparent contradiction between the passages of St. Paul and St. James but the contradiction that happens between what we believe and what we do is something we need to continually resolve and work on in our lives. We need to be intentional in living our faith in our lives. And so today, let us pray for the conviction, the courage and the means for us to translate our faith into deeds just as Mother Teresa did. As Jesus reminds us in Matthew 7:21, **“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father.”** Amen.