

Second Reading, 22nd to 26th Sundays : Year B, 2021

The Letter of James

In Year B, we read passages from the Letter of James for five Sundays, from the 22nd to the 26th Sundays in Ordinary Time.

The readings are taken from four of the five chapters in the Letter of James. The letter is also read between the 28th and 30th weeks of Ordinary Time every second year.

Readings for Ordinary Time – Year B

Twenty-second Sunday, James 1:17–18, 21–22, 27

From God come the gifts that complete and integrate the human person in all respects. When Christians fully accept the word that is planted in them, they become not just hearers of the word but people who use their hands and feet ('doers') to demonstrate their acceptance. To be truly religious people, we must avoid the self-deceit of simply listening and we must also act, by aiding the vulnerable, the 'orphans and widows'.

Twenty-third Sunday, James 2:1–5

In typically strong language, the letter attacks any discrimination among social classes practiced by those who profess faith in Jesus Christ, and underlines the community dislocation that follows from such partiality as well as the corrupt judgment involved. In fact, God specifically chose those that the world sees as poor 'to be the heirs to the kingdom which he promised to those who love him'.

Twenty-fourth Sunday, James 2:14–18

With a characteristic contrast, the letter highlights the negative first, viz., the lack of faith-in-action towards the needy, such as wishing them well without lifting a finger to help, and sets that negative against the positive ideal of showing personal faith through practical good deeds.

Twenty-fifth Sunday, James 3:16–4:3

Again, this reading presents a contrast. Christ's followers must avoid jealousy and the selfish ambition that spawn disorder and wicked behaviour. Instead they must be people who act with pure, peaceful wisdom that comes from above and so 'will bear fruit in holiness'.

Twenty-sixth Sunday, James 5:1–6

In this graphic warning to the rich, the letter contrasts the negative (oppression by the rich of labourers and the just), with the positive (being steadfast and waiting patiently for the Lord's coming). If the high status that is valuable to a person on earth has also led to injustice towards others, then severe judgment from the 'Lord of hosts' will follow.

Background to the Letter of James

The name 'James' was common in the biblical world, and there are multiple men of that name mentioned in the New Testament. It is likely that James, described as 'the brother of the Lord' (Mark 6:3, Matt 13:55) and head of the Jerusalem church community, best fits the author who emerges from this text. James exercised an important role in early Christianity (see *Acts*, plus mentions in *Galatians*, *I Corinthians*), and was a leader among those who stayed close to their Jewish heritage and practices.

However, as the text was probably written in the 80s or 90s, it came well after James was martyred in 62 A.D. In addition, the quality of the Greek is excellent and the text indicates the author was well versed in Greek rhetorical skills. Many scholars conclude that the writer

was invoking the name of James when sending the letter to Jewish-Christian believers who were in modern Syria and northern Palestine.

The Letter of James, with its many exhortations, echoes the Wisdom literature that was common in Israel and in surrounding areas in the first two centuries B.C. There is also a pronounced emphasis on testing, temptation and responsibilities (especially for the rich), caring for the needy, as well as strong views on the impact of good and bad behaviour in the community. Over the centuries, the letter's comments on faith and works (2:14–26) and anointing of the sick (5:14–15) have been at the centre of much theological debate.

While there are only two references to Jesus, the letter makes many references to God as 'one', 'creator of the world', and 'merciful and compassionate,' as well as other descriptions. The letter includes many obvious parallels to verses found in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount (Chapter 5). Scholars believe that the authors of both the Letter of James and Matthew's gospel possibly used a common source document of recorded sayings of Jesus.

Major Themes and Structure of James

Overall, the letter keeps its focus on:

- Giving prophetic voice to the poor, marginalised and dispossessed in the community
- Ensuring believers bring their faith and actions into harmony
- The expression of ethical behaviour that is in harmony with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and that builds up harmony while avoiding division within community.

Brown and Hartin each provide a similar structure for the letter, and what follows borrows from each of those frameworks:

- Address, greeting and thanksgiving (1:1)
- Trials: wisdom and the lowly (1:2–11)
- Trials: hearers and doers of the word (1:12–27)
- Favouritism to the rich (2:1–13)
- Faith and works (2:14–26)
- Power of the tongue and speech (3:1–12)
- Call to friendship with God (3:13–4:10)
- Speaking evil against another (4:11–12)
- Judgment on the rich (4:13–5:6)
- Call to patient endurance (5:7–11)
- Admonitions on behaviour (5:12–20)

Further Reading

Raymond E Brown S.S., *Christ in the Gospels of the Liturgical Year*. Chapter 34: The Gospel According to Mark. Liturgical Press

Raymond E Brown S.S., *An Introduction to the New Testament*. Chapter 34, Epistle (Letter) of James. Doubleday

Harold A Buetow, *Thirst for Life*, (Meditations/homilies for the Weekdays of the Year, Vol 1, St Mark. (notes on the Catholic letters, James). St Paul's

Patrick J Hartin, *James, First Peter, Jude, Second Peter*. Vol 10, New Testament. New Collegeville Bible Commentary. Liturgical Press

John J Pilch, *The Cultural World of the Apostles*. The Second Reading, Year by Year. Year B. Liturgical Press