

Brought to Completion

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James 2.18-26, Mark 8.27-38

*Through the written word and the spoken word may we know your Living Word,
Jesus Christ our Saviour, Amen*

In last week's reading from James, we received a very straightforward and practical message that came as a breath fresh air:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So, faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (James 2. 14-17)

And today's passage (James 2.18-26) ends with a reinforcement of this message: *Just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.* But today's passage also has two examples of good works that are more challenging: those of Abraham and Rahab. James asks, "Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?" In much Christian thought the story of Abraham and Isaac is seen to prefigure the sacrifice of Jesus – or the saving work of the cross. James does not elaborate on this but says:

You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,' and he was called the friend of God."

He also recalls the story of Rahab in the Book of Joshua (2:9-13) Although there are elements to the story of Rahab that are unsettling to those mindful of never-ending stories of violent conquest and dispossession, she is remembered by James for her good works and in Hebrews 11.31 for her faith. This is a slight diversion – but an interesting one! Rahab is a Canaanite – sworn enemies of the Hebrews – in Deuteronomy there is an injunction to kill all Canaanites and to never marry them. Rahab is described as a prostitute, but the Hebrew also means inn-keeper – she may have been both - who shelters two Hebrew spies plotting the downfall of Jericho. She and her people are filled with terror after hearing of all the Lord has done for the Hebrew people in drying up the waters of the Red Sea – and of their success in 'utterly destroying' the Amorites. She declares to the spies her awe before their powerful God and seeks their assurance that she and her family will be spared if she hides them and helps them escape. They agree that a red cord hanging from her window in the city walls will be a sign to spare her house. Following the fall of Jericho – and the massacre of all its inhabitants except Rahab and her family - she marries into the tribe of Judah and is one of the four women listed in the beginning of Matthew's gospel as an ancestor of Jesus.

So, in the Jewish and Christian story she exemplifies courage - something like a heroine in the French Resistance. For some commentators, Rahab's survival illustrates salvation through faith from the avenging wrath of a powerful God – which I also find unsettling. As a version of history, it is interesting to reflect on an alternative telling of Rahab's story – one of fear and coercion, and a terrible decision to plead bargain for her family, while betraying her people. But if all this gives us pause for thought, we might remember last week's Gospel story from Mark of the Syrophenician woman who challenges Jesus to not only listen to a woman, but to extend his healing ministry beyond the house of Israel, to strangers and even to enemies. In Matthew she is said to be a Canaanite – of even lower status in Hebrew eyes than Syrophenicians - which only strengthens the good news about breaking taboos, and the advent of a new and peaceful relation with all people.

So, for me, the Rahab reference in James is a little problematic, but the big point he is making about Rahab is that she was "justified by works" just as Abraham's work is "reckoned to him as righteousness." James concludes that "a person is justified by works and not by faith alone" (2.24). But is the phrase 'justified by faith' ringing in your ears? – does Paul say the opposite?: "... a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by law." (Romans 3.28) And there are many other Pauline passages that repeat the phrase 'justified by faith' or 'saved through faith' and these are linked with grace – "for by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God." (Ephesians 2.8-9) "And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace." (Romans 11.6)

But do we need to pick sides? I think they are closer together than it seems at first – both see any system of law or religious piety as insufficient. When Paul talks of works, he is mostly concerned with works of piety associated with the law, rather than works springing from compassion. Both see faith as being of primary importance. James is not saying good works in themselves will ‘save’ us, only that works go hand in hand with faith – *Just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.* James sees that faith is “brought to completion” by works. James’ teaching may seem straightforward to us, but it has been the cause of much controversy over the course of Church history,

So, we need take a closer look at the theological understandings of the words *justified* and *righteousness*. I wouldn’t blame you for squirming in your seat at this point – they are quite forbidding words! - or perhaps falling asleep. ‘Righteousness’ has negative connotations of arrogance in everyday speech – but in theological terms it is more akin to rightness, goodness, and wholeness. ‘Justification’ is formally defined as the “event or process by which [humanity] is made or declared to be righteous in the sight of God.” Rather than seeking to reconcile the teachings of James and Paul on justification, theologians have tended to split into camps. In the early 5th century St Augustine espoused justification through grace not works, and was successful in having Pelagius renounced by the Church for his rejection of Augustine’s understanding of original sin and his notion of exerting free will to follow Jesus’ example. In the Reformation of the 1500s Martin Luther rejected medieval notions of merit and famously referred to James as ‘an epistle of straw.’ To reduce a vast and complex history and field of ideas to a few words: In Catholic theology justification is a process whereby a person is *made* righteous by grace – but our cooperation is required, and Christ’s righteousness is then inherent or *imparted* to us. In much Protestant theology, justification is an event in which a person is *declared* righteous. This grace is unearned and unmerited (due to that old chestnut of original sin!), and Christ’s righteousness is seen to be *imputed* i.e. credited or laid upon us, rather than transforming us, expressed in the Lutheran and Calvinist formulae ‘by faith alone’, and ‘by grace alone.’ⁱ Good works in the Catholic scheme are a manifestation of the righteousness poured into the soul; in the Protestant they are the good fruit and evidence of a ‘a true and lively faith.’ And where do we Anglicans sit? – Well, Articles 11 and 12 of the 39 Articles of 1562 put us squarely in the Lutheran “faith alone” camp on this point. But much water has passed under the bridge since 1562, and as we know, we are now a very diverse church with a great breadth of views and freedom to express them.

I have to say, I feel rather bamboozled by all this theology, but the phrase *theosis* popped into my head and I remember being lifted by the perspective of the Eastern Orthodox church who do not emphasise justification – seeing Western thought as too legalistic. Forgiveness for sin plays its part, but because the notion of inherited guilt does not figure, the language around grace looks quite different. In place of justification is the notion of ‘theosis’ meaning “making divine” – a process of transformation into the likeness of God, into union with the divine, through the synergy – the cooperation of human and divine energies. Ancient wisdom for modern ears.

But what does all this talk of justification or transformation mean to us? Perhaps this is the moment to direct Jesus’ question of the disciples to ourselves: “But who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8.29) It seems that in order to answer that question we have a great work to do – the work of taking up our cross and following Jesus. (Mark 8.34) This, I feel, is not only a question of having faith in who Jesus is, but of doing as Jesus does. Picking up our own cross is the path to ‘rightness’ with God and wholeness. This is no easy work – no wonder that it becomes problematic to say we are justified by works – for who could do enough? After reading James last week, I was left wondering if I am doing enough for this troubled world. Too often I think about my contribution a little grudgingly – with a sense of what ‘I ought to do’, or ‘should do.’ I then, I confess, start to ‘justify’ myself to myself by listing my good works – my phone calls, things I’ve organised for others, and donations I make, etc. But this is quite the opposite of what James intends – such ‘ought tos and shoulds are deadening. Our ‘works are not measured or quantified, or even judged by a loving God. A more life-giving question would be: is the well-spring of my faith flowing through and transforming my life? – do the things I feel and know in my heart find expression in my relationships? Is my love of creation in line with the sustainability of my daily life? Am I open and generous in support of strangers near and far, as well as friends? This, I think, is the gift of the book of James – it simply reminds us to bring our faith to completion by following Christ in all we do and say.

May the thoughts of our hearts and the work of our hands be blessed this coming week, Amen

ⁱ The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, edited by F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone. 3rd ed. Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 914