



Kjell Nordstokke: Sermon on occasion of the 35th Anniversary Celebrations of Diakonia Council of Churches

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Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ!

The grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all!

James 1:21-27 (King James Version)

²¹Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls. ²²But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. ²³For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: ²⁴For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. ²⁵But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed. ²⁶If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. ²⁷Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

It is somehow challenging to preach based on a passage from James, as in many church traditions this letter is not recognized as central Christian when presenting its message. Some hold it to be more moralistic than evangelical and even polemic as it stresses that faith without works is dead. Such statements may be read as a criticism of Pauline theology. And it is clear: When St. Paul's teaching that we are saved by faith alone is made fundamental for interpreting the Bible, James' saying may seem not only problematic, but can be judged as anti-evangelical as concluded Martin Luther who described it as a "straw letter" that he would not miss if it was deleted from the New Testament.

Newer research has helped us to see things differently, first of all that this letter should not be read as a reaction to Pauline theology, but that it stand on its own motivated by a concern that is profoundly rooted in Biblical teaching, namely that the new life in Christ is to be expressed and made visible in the wholeness of human reality. This concern is also expressed in the letters of St. Paul:

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new (2 Corinthians 5:17).

All authors of the New Testament confess this newness as an integral dimension of being in Christ, as an expressing of our being, and not – as often taught in the churches – a wishful consequence of being in Christ, or could we say: an ethical imperative. Such position tends to reduce Christian discipleship to human obedience and eventually merit before God. The point here is quite another:

There is a fundamental connection between what we are in Christ and what we do in Christ, both express God's gracious work of salvation, transformation and empowerment, and the gift of being included in God's mission for the healing of the world.

So much for the introduction. Now I come to the sermon as reflection over the given text. In line with the tradition of Protestant preaching, I have three points:

The first relates to verse 23 in the form of the question: What do you see when you look in a mirror? A pious person may answer: I see a sinner. But this is not the answer here, it is rather: I see a whole body, not only an ear. Exactly, would James comment, you are more than a pair of ears!

Consequently, you cannot limit the newness of life in Christ to listening. It encompasses all your being, for instance your tongue – an issue that James takes up again later in the letter (3:1-12): remember, he says, the tongue is a little member, but it boasts great things, good things and bad things.

So also the many other members of the body: our hands and our feet. Where do they take us and which actions do they perform?

The word coming to us is not only intended for our ears, or could we say, for our cognitive capacity. It is also intended for our stomach – our emotions and sentiments – and for our feet and arms to be mobilized.

Sometimes faith is presented as restricted to the religious sphere. James contradicts such understanding and also the one that claims that faith in the first place is a question of dogmas and convictions. Such conceptions may have emerged due to Western understanding of "word" as something rational for our mind or intellectual capacity to deal with. Especially the Hebrew, but also the Greek concept of "word" is much broader and above all dynamic – as God's word of creation, as God's incarnated word bring near God's Reign. So the word does not only reach and activate our ears, but all our being as body, mind and spirit, and as social beings – to be doers of God's liberating word.

This is a word to us as individuals, but also as congregations. Not only the head – the bishop and the employed staff – is to be seen in this mirror of new life in Christ, but the whole body of Christ where often the seemingly insignificant member by God's grace is given significance and thus indispensable tasks to fulfill.

There is another dimension to what comes to your eyes when looking in the mirror: that is the picture of a human being created in the image of God. This is the second point in my sermon.

The expression "image of God" is not used by James, but indirectly he points at it when he reminds the readers of the mighty works of the Creator:

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning (verse 17) ... Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls (verse 21).

Scholars have concluded that God's image does not refer to external appearance, but in the first place to the internal capacity of being in communication with God and God's word as spoken to us.

This, I think, is the meaning of the rather obscure expression in verse 21: “the engrafted word” (Greek: *logos emphytos*). So what James says is this: Have a look in the mirror. What do you see? I see a body consisting of many members. Correct, now have another look because there is more to it than that. God’s own word is engrafted or implanted in you. It is not easy to see. But it is there as God’s gift and promise, and as energy that empowers for the work each one of us is called to.

James’ background is Jewish Christianity. That tradition cherished the view that the Torah – God’s law – was to be written in the hearts of God’s people (Jeremiah 31:33). Only then the faithful will live according to God’s justice and righteousness. Now this has become reality in Christ. As James expresses this in verse 18:

Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

This view contains at least three fundamental insights:

First, that there is a profound connection, or even better: continuity, between creation and salvation. Creation is God’s first act of love, while salvation as God’s second act of love restores human being’s mandate to care about creation, its wellbeing and integrity, thus reestablishing what Adam and Eve were called to be in the Garden: God’s stewards and co-workers.

Second, this view affirms human dignity. Created in God’s image and given new life in Christ God’s people is equipped and empowered to act according to its mandate. We should therefore not allow false voices blind us saying that it is up to the powerful to take care of the earth, or paralyze us claiming that it is hopeless to struggle for a better world to live in. Our dignity – given by the Creator and restored in Christ – does make a difference in this world, as does the dignity of those who surround us, and above all the dignity of the marginalized and the victims of injustice and poverty. Transformation is possible if we join our forces.

This links to the third insight of this view: Struggling for justice is a prime cause and task! This has brought me to the last and third point in my sermon: Solidarity with and care for the poor are hallmarks of the new life in Christ – not only as a matter of ethics, but as an integral dimension and expression of Christian faith.

James formulates this as follows (in verse 27):

Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

This saying clearly echoes the words of the Old Testament prophets and also the praxis of Jesus and it strongly advocates the prophetic ministry of the church. In those time orphans and widows represented those without legal rights and therefore easily excluded and victimized by injustice and evil. They often experienced how suffering is added to suffering, which also happens today when people at the margin of society are doomed to carry the burdens of neo-liberal economics as well as the effects of climate change.

James tells us to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, which means to get close to their reality and listen to their stories, and then act accordingly. Such visitation goes beyond solidarity, it requires

acts of restoring community, of defending human dignity and the right to be a subject that holds rights and is mandated by the Creator to participate in the construction of a world that is better for all of us to live in.

That is why the prophetic ministry of the church (or: prophetic diakonia) must be an integral part of its mission. It denounces injustice and discrimination, it announces God's liberating justice and mighty acts as Creator and Savior, and it mobilizes the people of God to participate in God's mission of healing, reconciliation and transformation.

May the gracious Lord bless us and empower us for such mission helping us to remember what we see when looking in the mirror:

1. The full body being recognized and dignified for serving God, and the Word of Truth that has been implanted in us.
2. The world as arena of God's action – the world so much loved by the Creator that his only Son was sent for its redemption and healing.
3. The mission of bringing justice where God's good intention for creation has been broken and people suffer oppression, exclusion and violence; justice as sign of God's inbreaching Reign, once to come in its fullness, but already anticipated in faith, hope and love.

May God bless and strengthen Diakonia Council of Churches and its people, and all of us, to continue the ministry given to us as fulfillment of our prayer: Your Kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.