

Each of us should ask ourselves the question prompted by Saint James, is my faith alive or dead? As we are here in church, on Sunday, we may be tempted to answer too quickly, “of course my faith is alive.” But Saint James was writing to a community much like ours, a first century equivalent of faithful church-going Catholics. But still he warns them against a faith that is dead.

Saint James explains that if our faith is deeply rooted in love for Jesus Christ, if we truly believe in Him, then our faith will express itself in the works that we do. Following Christ, loving God, shows in us by how we love our brothers and sisters, and how we treat our neighbors.

So before we answer the question, is my faith alive or dead, we must first answer the question, does my faith show itself in what I do, what I say, and how I act, especially on every other day of the week when I am not in church?

It is not enough to attend Mass on Sunday and believe one or two teachings of the Church. That is no great Christian accomplishment. Our entire life must answer God’s call. Saint James reminds us of this by recalling Abraham, who was willing to sacrifice his own son, to give back to God what God had given him. No one can answer James’ challenge, to show a faith without works, because that type of faith has no effect on the lives it touches. Saint Paul tells us that faith must be “active in love” (Gal 5:6) because otherwise it is loveless. A faith without love is a dead faith.

There was a time in England when most people could not read or write and so these truths of faith were taught to them in different ways. For example a play, a morality play, might be performed in the town square. In one such play God sends Death to a character called Everyman. Everyman is to come and give an accounting of his life. He tries to bribe Death into giving him more time but only succeeds in getting Death to permit him to bring someone along to speak on his behalf when facing the Divine Judge.

Everyman first goes to Friendship. Friendship promises to accompany him but when he learns of their destination he refuses to go. The same for the characters Family and Relations, they also refuse to go but they make excuses as to why.

The truth is that no person will accompany Everyman because they all have their own accounts to prepare, even our closest friends.

Everyman next goes to Wealth, because he has put so much effort into acquiring material goods he is sure that Wealth will go with him. But Wealth is afraid that his presence will only make God's judgment more severe.

Finally Everyman turns to Works. Works is willing to come but she is weak because Everyman has not loved her in his life. So Everyman goes to see Confession. In the presence of Confession, Everyman repents his sins to God and is absolved and Works is strengthened. They then go to see Priesthood and Works is further strengthened as Everyman receives the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Everyman dies and ascends to Heaven accompanied by works. There he is greeted by an angel who welcomes him with the words, “Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of the Master’s house.”

At the end of the play a character representing Scholarship explains the moral. In the end a man will have only his works to accompany him beyond the grave because it is his work, his good deeds, which show the depth of his faith.

But what happens when that faith is challenged?

Take Saint Peter in today’s Gospel. On the one hand Peter professes his faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, but then a moment later Jesus rebukes him for his lack of faith. It is important to remember that to first century Judea, the Messiah was expected to be someone who would come and lead Israel in revolt against its oppressors. Peter and the other disciples still held this view. That is why when they refer to Jesus as the Messiah; He forbids them from spreading that title around. Then for the first time He tells them of the fate that awaits the Son of Man, suffering, rejection, death, and Resurrection. When Peter objects Jesus sends him away, calling him Satan, a seducer and gainsayer. Peter had faith but only up to a point. He was willing to follow Jesus as He preached but he balked at following him to the cross. It would still be a while before Peter began to have a sense of the Truth, a Truth that he and his successors have passed on to us over thousands of years.

The mission Jesus lays out for Himself, the task He has been sent to accomplish, is not for Him alone but for everyone who believes and

follows Him. Here we have the full meaning of the words of Saint James. Faith without the work of the Passion is not a Christian faith. The work that comes from faith is an act of complete self-giving, whether it is to God or to one's neighbor or friend. Yes that may involve suffering, discomfort, or even death but that is entirely secondary. Even if we were to lose our lives God has promised us that we will regain them. A strong, vibrant, mature faith, the kind that fills us with true Christian joy and wisdom, is acquired through fidelity under fire. St. Cyprian feared that in his time the peace the Church had enjoyed had weakened the faith of many Christians. Our faith lives most strongly when we hold to it even, or perhaps especially, when we are challenged.

Today's first reading describes the Servant of God as one who stands up to his enemies while they beat him, tear out his beard, and spit in his face. He knows that God does not abandon him, despite his feelings of abandonment; it is in God that he finds his strength.

Our task in this life is to prepare for the next by building up the Kingdom. We build the Kingdom by winning souls for God. With all that is going on in the Church today, all the attacks by the Enemy, many people, whose faith has been weakened, are reluctant to proclaim openly that they are Catholic. I have seen priests who formerly wore their clerical dress at all times, now more often than not, do not wear their collar in public because of the hatred and animosity that is being directed at all of our priests. But the vast majority of our priests are good, holy men, who have sacrificed much for our sake. And we need the public witness of our faith now more than ever. We need Catholics who

demonstrate to the world what it truly means to be Catholic, by the works they do.

It does not matter that the world hates us. Most of the world does not truly understand our faith. And Our Lord promised that we would be persecuted and attacked as He was. Whether that attack comes from within the Church or from without, is irrelevant. It is all the work of the devil.

What should we do in this ongoing crisis? We can start by recalling the Benedictine motto, *ora et labora*, pray and work. Focus on our faith and the work we are called to do as a result of that faith. Steel is made stronger in the fire of the forge, our faith is made stronger by the fire of scandal and persecution.

And with a strong robust faith, a faith that is alive, our works and deeds will follow as naturally as day follows night. Our love of God will be evident in everything we do, in all our words and in all our actions. When we have completely given ourselves over to God, regardless of the cost, then we will win souls and build the Kingdom. And finally when we are called to account for our lives and the use of the gifts God has given us, we too may be greeted by an angel and hear those words,

“Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of the Master’s house.”