

[Formatted for oral delivery]

IN OUR SECOND READING THIS MORNING JAMES, IN HIS LETTER TO HIS OWN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY, ... JAMES CONTINUES HIS FOCUS ON WORKS OVER FAITH AS WE HAVE EXPRESSED IT FOR THE LAST 500 YEARS. I DON'T KNOW THAT AT THE TIME HIS CONGREGATION WOULD HAVE MADE SO MUCH OF A DISTINCTION BETWEEN FAITH AND WORKS. WE HAVE IMBIBED DEEPLY OF THE SPIRIT OF THE REFORMATION AND DISTILLED ITS MESSAGE AS ONE ALL ABOUT FAITH OVER WORKS. THE APOSTLE PAUL IS THE CHAMPION OF THOSE WHO PROCLAIM FAITH AS THE WAY AND JAMES, OUR WRITER THIS MORNING, IS FAVORED BY THOSE WHO THINK ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS. IT IS ONE OF THE CLASSIC DEBATES OF OUR TIME WITHIN CHRISTIANITY. IS IT BY FAITH OR BY WORKS THAT SALVATION IS OBTAINED?

C.S.LEWIS WROTE, OF COURSE, MORE THAN THE LION, THE WITCH, AND THE WARDROBE. HE REMAINS FOR US TODAY A GREAT INTERPRETER OF CHRISTIAN BELIEF AND OFFERS A BETTER BALANCE BETWEEN FAITH AND WORKS. HE OBSERVED: "CHRISTIANS HAVE OFTEN DISPUTED AS TO WHETHER WHAT LEADS THE CHRISTIAN HOME IS GOOD ACTIONS OR FAITH IN CHRIST." HE ANSWERED, "IT SEEMS TO ME LIKE ASKING WHICH BLADE ON A PAIR OF SCISSORS IS MOST NECESSARY." IT WOULD SEEM THAT THE EARLY CHRISTIANS WHO FORMED THE BODY OF WRITING THAT WE KNOW AS THE NEW TESTAMENT ALSO WANTED TO PRESENT THAT BALANCE, THEREFORE, PAUL AND HIS FOCUS ON FAITH IS THERE ALONG WITH JAMES AND HIS ADMONITION TO BE DOERS OF THE WORD. THAT PHRASE COMES IN THE READING WE HEARD LAST WEEK BUT IS REFLECTED THROUGHOUT HIS LETTER AND WOULD EVEN SERVE AS A SUMMARY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT READING THIS MORNING. BOTH TEXTS FOCUS ON THE FAITHFUL AS DOERS OF THE WORD.

I WANT TO PROVIDE YOU WITH A DIFFERENT WAY OF READING THAT ADMONITION FROM JAMES THAT WE BE DOERS OF THE WORD. WHEN WE LOOK AT THE PASSAGE AS TRANSLATED INTO ANCIENT GREEK THE WORD "DOER" CAN ALSO BE TRANSLATED AS "POET" AND THE GREEK TRANSLATED AS "WORD" IS IN OTHER PLACES TRANSLATED AS LOGOS WHICH ITSELF IS OFTEN TRANSLATED AS A REFERENCE TO JESUS THE CHRIST.

TRANSLATING THE GREEK AS DOERS OF THE WORD IS NOT WRONG BUT NEITHER WOULD IT BE WRONG TO TRANSLATE THE PHRASE AS POETS OF JESUS CHRIST. JAMES URGES THAT WE BE POETS OF CHRIST. FOR ME THAT IS A RICHER AND CERTAINLY MORE INTRIGUING POSSIBILITY. NO DOUBT WE NEED TO BE DOERS OF THE WORD BUT WHAT ABOUT BEING POETS OF CHRIST.

ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS I EXPECT OF A POET IS THAT THEY OFTEN CONVEY SOMETHING MORE THAN JUST THE FACTS. THEY OFTEN BRING US IN THEIR VERSE A TRUTH THAT IS SOMETHING MORE THAN A SIMPLE BLOW BY BLOW OF WHAT HAPPENED. IN THIS SENSE ALL OF THE WRITERS OF THE FOUR GOSPELS WERE POETS OF CHRIST. THEIR GOAL WAS NEVER SIMPLY TO RECORD A BLOW BY BLOW HISTORY OF THEIR TIME WITH JESUS. THEY TELL US SOMETHING OF WHAT HAPPENED BUT IT IS IN SUPPORT OF A GREATER TRUTH THAT EMERGES FROM THE TEXT. ACTUALLY THIS IS THE TENSION IN THE GOSPEL THIS MORNING. JESUS HAS REALIZED THAT HIS MESSAGE IS ACTUALLY BEING SWAMPED BY HIS DEEDS. HE IS QUICKLY BECOMING A WONDER-WORKER ...A SIDE SHOW AND IN THE CONFUSION, THE TRUTH IS BEING TRAMPLED AND LOST. THEREFORE HE TRY'S TO ACT IN PRIVATE BUT DEEDS LIKE HIS DO NOT GO UNNOTICED...CANNOT BE HIDDEN UNDER A BUSHEL. JESUS STRUGGLES TO HELP THEM GRASP THAT HIS PRESENCE IS ABOUT MORE THAN FULL STOMACHS ...IN THIS HE IS A POET OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

I HAVE KNOWN OTHER POETS OF THE FAITH ... DOERS OF THE WORD OVER THE YEARS. MOST OF WHOM PROBABLY NEVER WROTE A POEM BUT WITH THEIR LIVES THEY CONVEYED THE DEEP MYSTERY OF FAITH. I REMEMBER A WOMAN IN MY FIRST PARISH WHO WAS SUFFERING IMMENSELY THROUGH CANCER. THERE WERE FEW OPTIONS. I RECALL VISITING AS HER HOSPITAL STAYS BECAME LONGER AND MORE FREQUENT. SHE RARELY LEFT THE BED. THERE WAS LITTLE SHE COULD DO YET SHE WAS A POET OF CHRIST. IN HER DEEP JOY, HER QUIET TRUST, HER REFUSAL TO SURRENDER TO PAIN AND FEAR, HER CHEERY GREETING AND INTEREST IN ALL THAT HAPPENED BEYOND HER ROOM ... IN ALL THIS SHE WAS A POET OF CHIRST.

THE GOSPELS ACTUALLY MAKE A CLEAR DSTINCTION BETWEEN THOSE WHO ARE DOERS OF THE WORD ONLY AND THOSE WHO ARE POETS OF CHRIST. THE PHARISEES FOR EXAMPLE STRAIN AT EVERY JOT AND TITTLE IN THE LAW BUT FAIL TO GRASP THAT ITS AUTHOR STANDS NOW IN THEIR MIDST. THEY ARE DOERS OF THE WORD TO A FAULT BUT FAIL THEREBY TO BRING OTHERS TO THE TRUTH. JESUS STRUGGLES TO HELP THEM STRIKE THE BALANCE AND THUS FIND THEMSELVES IN THE KINGDOM.

THERE IS A HUMOROUS TALE FROM THE EARLY DAYS OF MISSIONARIES...A TALE OF A MISSIONARY WHO STRUGGLED MIGHTILY TO CONVERT THE CHIEF OF A TRIBE. HE CAREFULLY TAUGHT THE CHIEF THAT HE MUST CURB MUCH OF HIS BEHAVIOR. HE TOLD THE CHIEF HE MUST NOT TAKE HIS NEIGHBOR'S WIFE OR IVORY OR OXEN; THAT HE MUST NOT DANCE THE WAR DANCE; ON AND ON THE MISSIONARY EXPLAINED THE RULES BUT THE CHIEF REMAINED UNCONVINCED. FINALLY THE CHIEF EXPLAINED THAT HE WAS OLD AND HE COULD NOT

DO MOST OF THESE THINGS ANYMORE ANYWAY SO HE WONDERED WHAT WAS SO SPECIAL ABOUT THIS CHRISTIANITY. THE CHIEF HAD UNDERSTOOD SOMETHING OF THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN BEING POETS OF CHRIST NOT JUST DOERS OF THE WORD.

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISSI...THE SAINT OFTEN MENTIONED AS HAVING COME CLOSEST TO FULLY IMMULATING THE LIFE OF CHRIST ... UNDERSTOOD HIS CALL WAS TO REBUILD GOD'S CHURCH SO HE FOUND AN ABANDONED CHAPEL AND BEGAN STONE BY STONE TO REBUILD THE CHAPEL. IN THIS HE BECAME A DOER OF THE WORD BUT SENSED HIS RESPONSE FELL SHORT. IT WAS ONLY LATER THAT HE HEARD THE GREATER TRUTH CONTAINED WITHIN THE WORDS "REBUILD MY CHURCH" AND THUS BECAME A POET OF CHRIST.

ACTUALLY IT IS POSSIBLE TO VIEW MUCH OF THE STRUGGLE WITHIN MAJOR CHRISTIAN DENOMNATIONS TODAY AS A STRUGGLE TO UNDERSTAND THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN BEING SOLELY DOERS OF THE WORD VERSUS BEING POETS OF CHRIST. IN THE 18TH AND 19TH CENTURIES, PARTLY IN RESPONSE TO THE COMPELLING SUCCESSES OF SCIENCE, CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIANS SOUGHT TO TRANSFORM THE FAITH SO THAT IT MIGHT COMPETE MORE EFFECTIVELY WITH THE SCIENTIFIC WORLD VIEW. THEY SOUGHT TO SYSTEMIZE THEOLOGY AND TO MAKE FAITHFULNESS SOMETHING THAT COULD BE LISTED...SOMETHING WITH STEPS ... SOMETHING THAT COULD BE OUTWARDLY CONFIRMED AND OBJECTIVELY STUDIED. THEOLOGIANS WROTE SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGIES, SCHOLARS STUDIED SCRIPTURE AS ANY OTHER TEXT, AND DENOMINATIONS WROTE LONG, COMPLEX STATEMENTS OF THEIR BELIEFS. THEY WERE NOT WRONG IN THIS BUT IN THE 21ST CENTURY WE ARE CALLED TO RESTRIKE THE BALANCE.

LIKE ST. FRANCIS OUR CALL IS TO BUILD GOD'S CHURCH BUT OUR FOCUS IS TO BE DIFFERENT FROM THOSE IN THE 18TH CENTURY. PEOPLE WANT NOT A SCIENCE OF RELIGION BUT RATHER A RELATIONSHIP WITH A LIVING GOD. THEY WANT COMMUNITIES OF FAITH NOT JUST CAREFULLY CRAFTED STATEMENTS OF BELIEF. MORE THAN EXPLAINING OUR FAITH...THEY WANT US TO LIVE IT...INDEED TO BE IT. THEY NEED US TO UNDERSTAND THAT THE WORD IS MORE THAN WORDS ON A PAGE AND THAT DOING MEANS MORE THAN PROFUNCTORY ACTIONS...THAT BELIEF MUST RESOLVED INTO TRUST AND THAT ACTIONS ARE BEST DONE WITHIN THE CRUCIBLE OF A WEB OF RELATIONSHIPS...THAT WE ARE CALLED TO BE NOT ONLY DOERS OF THE WORD BUT ALSO POETS OF CHRIST...