

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Proper 18 – Year B

RCL Readings – Isaiah 35:4-7a; Psalm 146; James 2:1-10, (11-13), 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

ACNA Readings – Isaiah 35:4-7a; Psalm 146; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:31-37

Seasonal Introduction. The Christian calendar revolves around two principal feasts: Christmas (involving Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany) and Easter (involving Lent, Easter, and Pentecost). Then there is a large section in the middle called ordinary time. This season often focuses on the growth of the Church, ending in a season known as Kingdome tide which concludes with the feast of Christ the king. During this time we read and hear the bulk of the teachings of Jesus in relation to the kingdom of heaven and how we are called to live as disciples of the Messiah.

Common Theme. In his famous public speech, civil rights activist Martin Luther King declared, “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal... I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

That dream may never be fully fulfilled in this world. But our readings today show that, while we may discriminate on intellectual, ethnic, or socio-economic basis, we absolutely should not. Because, while this dream might not be true on earth (yet), God does not discriminate as we do. He brings life and healing to all who are in need and turn to Him. If we declare that we have faith in God, we too should bring life and healing to everyone around us. Otherwise our behaviour gives truth to the lie in our heart. And make no mistake, we will be judged by the content of our character.

Hebraic Context. For the ancient Biblical writers, doing something defines both the action done and the doer of the action. Another way to put this is that people are known and defined through what they do. This holds true for both God and His creation. We say that God is good, but how do we actually know that to be true? God is good because He does good and what is good is known to be good by its being done by God.¹

In Jewish hermeneutics, when this is applied to humans, you do the truth, not simply believe in the truth. If you believe something to be the truth and you act the opposite, then not only is this hypocritical but it also reveals that, deep down, you likely don't really believe it to be true.² The

¹ This may seem like circular reasoning, and perhaps it is, but that makes it no less true.

² The opposite can also be true, as our actions can help in our spiritual maturity. Praising God in song can be worthless if we aren't worshipping him with our entire being—both in our soul and our actions. But hearing, singing, or reading a Psalm, song, or spiritual hymn can still help us turn back to Him in a time of despair or pride. Kneeling before God in prayer, even when we don't want to, can help us repent or give thanksgiving. And serving our neighbours in love is God's commandment whether we feel like it or not. And in the doing we can be faithful to Him who was faithful to us and see all the reasons we should be worshipping, confessing, and giving thanksgiving to the almighty God.

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Proper 18 – Year B

prophets are clear when they say; “Act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). To do the opposite is to walk toward a very dark path indeed.

In the sacred history of Israel God demonstrated that He is impartial in His behaviour. During the exodus from Egypt, the Lord did not only rescue Hebrew slaves but a mixed multitude accompanied the Israelites and they too were rescued out of darkness. Redemption at passover included both Jews and Gentiles, slaves and their slave owners, the rich and the poor. Everyone equally passed through the Red Sea on the way to Mount Sinai, thus both Jews and Gentiles heard the voice of God. While the Scriptures often call the Lord the God of Israel, we all know He is much more than that. Jewish prayer always begins with the omnipresent proclamation that He is “King of the universe”.

Following the example set by His Father, Jesus also served rich and poor, male and female, Jew and Gentile. While His primary ministry was to Israel, the promised redeemer was also to be a light to the Gentiles. The Gospels recorded several encounters with Gentiles and Samaritans and His behaviour towards them taught His disciples that God does not discriminate.³ Jesus met with and taught the rich, healing their children and slaves. He also met with the poor, giving sight to the blind and making the lame leap. Finally when the apostle John was shown a vision of heaven he recorded in Revelation that he witnessed people from every tribe and tongue standing before the throne of God.⁴

Isaiah 35:4-7a. Isaiah was called to prophesy to a nation whose hearts were fearful from their present-day trials.⁵ The Assyrian invasion under Sennacherib had not yet been turned back.⁶ In Isaiah 34, Isaiah had prophesied judgment on the Gentile nations but would the wrath of God also remain on Israel? “Behold, your God will come with vengeance.”

³ In Luke 9:51-56, the disciples asked Jesus if they could call down fire on the Samaritans that rejected them. Jesus rebuked them and they continued on their way. By Acts 8:14-17, following the example of Jesus' positive interactions with the Samaritans (and Philip's ministry in Samaria), the apostles were able to lay their hands on many Samaritans in order to receive the Holy Spirit rather than the destructive fire they had first thought to call on the Samaritans.

⁴ This includes people from: Egypt, where God had to redeem His people from slavery; Moab, who so often fought against Israel; Philistia, who mocked the God of Israel; Assyria, who slaughtered the people of God indiscriminately; Babylon, where the children of Israel grieved; the Seleucid Empire, where soldiers and kings watched as whole families were martyred for their belief in God; and, indeed, wherever those in darkness repent. For God's mercy is great and repentance is available to everyone in equal measure.

⁵ For anyone who has never been in an all out war, it is impossible to understand just how much it affects everything in life—food prices soar and work becomes unavailable; family members may never come home from fighting or leave home because of rampant disease; constant fear or even despair, along with bitter hatred (or hollow numbness) become constant companions.

⁶ See Isaiah 37:21-38.

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Proper 18 – Year B

“He will come and save you.” In Isaiah 37, there would be a military victory against the Assyrians (purely through the vengeance and recompense of God).⁷ But the prophetic salvation is more than a military victory, for when God's salvation comes miraculous power comes with it. With the coming redemption the Lord will heal and perform miracles among the sick. And all creation, including the earth itself, will be affected. Everything that seems wrong will become right.

The language lends itself to various messianic interpretations, beginning with Israel's changed and emboldened hearts. The Lord's vengeance is accompanied by recompense for both His enemies and His people. Dry sands become streams of water; deaf ears can hear and blind eyes can see. The coming redemption is indeed something to be extremely hopeful for. These images were used by Jesus in Matthew 11 to describe to the disciples of John the Baptist that the messianic age had indeed arrived. Redemption is tangible, touching the physical world and is something that can be seen. Messianic salvation is not an esoteric spiritual thought or emotive feeling—it's a God in action among His creation.

Psalm 146.⁸ The command of this Psalm is to praise the LORD. The Psalms were often sung and prayed by people coming to worship God. But true adoration of God is not simply external, verbal praise—praising God must come from the whole being, in life as it does in song. What's the alternative to praising God? Well, one alternative is to put our trust in princes.

There is a tendency to have greater respect for those with wealth and people in positions of power than we ought to. Our presidents, kings, and governors are, in reality, men of flesh like ourselves. In the end they will all disappoint and their endeavours, no matter how well intentioned, will all come to a close.⁹ Obviously our faith should be in something that endures

⁷ Assyria would be defeated by the righteous judgment of God. But there is a constant theme of a highway running through Isaiah. Isaiah 11 specifically mentions a highway that will return the diaspora from Assyria and the Middle East to Egypt and North Africa. But Isaiah 19 includes the actual inhabitants of those lands who will also join Israel in turning to God. So while military defeat of Assyria would bring hope to Israel, there would also be hope for Assyrians should they come and worship the LORD. Isaiah 33 mentions that this highway has no travelers but Isaiah 35 says that one day the ransomed of the LORD shall return to Zion (including fools). Isaiah 40 and 62 tells the people of God to prepare the highway of God while Isaiah 49 speaks of God building the highway.

⁸ The word '*Hallelujah*' הַלְלוּיָהּ is an imperative to 'Praise the Lord' and the word stands at the beginning of eleven psalms: 106, 111-113, 117, 135, 146-150. *Hallelujah* is also the final word of twelve psalms: 104-106, 113, 115-116, 135, 146-150. Psalm 146-150 don't have an ascribed author, although it's possible that they were written by Levitical worship leaders for use in the Temple.

⁹ Sometimes we absolutely do not trust people in leadership but we can actually fall into the same trap of looking at them in fear, disgust, or occasional hope. They are still mere men and women. We should still look to worship God as long as we live—even as our fight is not against “flesh and blood but against the

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Proper 18 – Year B

longer than the lifespan of a monarch or a short lived parliamentary term. Our trust and hope should be in the eternal Lord. And it is to Him that we should profess our love and loyalty.

The psalmist proceeded to bring evidence of God's goodness and creative power. God made the heavens and the earth. He is thus supremely powerful who can exercise his dominion in ways mortals cannot. The Lord's use of His power is for truth and justice. God provides food and sustains all His creatures that He called into being. The Lord is able to do the things that our modern elites and intellectuals promise to do but inevitably fail to deliver. God rescues the captives and heals the sick. It is the Lord, not a philosophy or government of man, who cares for the widows and orphans—the ones at the bottom of the socioeconomic levels.¹⁰ And as opposed to the great and renowned of the earth, the Lord will live and reign forever. If there is anyone worthy of our allegiance with oaths of loyalty, then surely it is only the Lord.

In describing the reasons to trust the eternal God over frail human leadership, the psalmist incorporates a lot of the redemptive imagery of God, perhaps sourced from Deuteronomy 10:12-21. This redemptive imagery became messianic in nature, particularly in Isaiah. Certainly both Psalm 146:7-8 and Isaiah 61:1-2 seem to speak of a great time of God's redemption that comes to fruition in Luke 4:18-19. But Deuteronomy made it clear that these redemptive actions were also commanded for God's people to partake.

Hebraic Perspective. We engage in comparisons every day. When we make a decision, whether in politics or our job, we weigh our options by contrasting and comparing them. But we also compare ourselves and our social circle with others, whether in how successful we feel we are (or aren't) or even in how godly we think we are compared to others. James tells us plainly that discrimination against someone is not to be trifled with, "If you really fulfill the royal law

rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

¹⁰ And if we are praising the LORD with our whole being then we too will be serving the widow, the orphans, and the stranger. We too will be healing the blind. Otherwise, we are simply singing words.

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Proper 18 – Year B

according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing well.¹¹ ¹² But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors."

The royal law mentioned in James 2:8 comes from Leviticus 19:18 and is not found in the 10 Commandments. Typically we think of the "Big Ten" as foundational to the whole law and might be surprised that "the Golden Rule" (Matthew 7:12) might have developed out of Leviticus. The term "royal" in Greek refers to something regal and belonging to the sovereign or preeminent king or nobleman. However, in Jewish thought, God is king and the Torah was the crown of heaven. There was also a crown of Torah signifying authority of a man who studied Torah. But knowledge to exalt oneself while presumptuously judging others is "foolish, wicked, and arrogant."¹³

¹¹ What does it mean to fulfill? There are two Greek words that are commonly translated "fulfill" in our English Bibles. James uses the term *τελειτε* (*teleite*) here. This is also used in Romans 13:6, "For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing." If you are unsure where the word "fulfill" is there, it is to "pay" taxes (*τελειτε*). Matthew 17:24 states, "When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax went up to Peter and said, 'Does your teacher not pay (*τελει*) the tax?'"

The term was a favorite of Josephus Flavius, a contemporary of some of the Apostles who weren't already martyred. "I [Demetrius I] will free you from the greatest part of the tributes and taxes which you formerly paid to the kings my predecessors, and to myself..." (AJ 13.48) Again, in *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 2.192 Josephus, when speaking of Joseph's taxation of Egypt, wrote "He also exhorted them to look on it as every one's own possession, and to fall to their husbandry with cheerfulness, and to pay as a tribute to the king, the fifth part of the fruits for the land which the king, when it was his own, restored to them."

Τελεω (*teleo*) is also commonly used to indicate something has been accomplished, completed or even perfected. Jesus used a form of this word (*τετελεσται*) when at the cross, "It is finished." But perhaps the connection between the royal law and giving God what is due Him as king should not be ignored. God doesn't simply ask us to love our neighbour as ourselves, we are obligated to do so.

¹² James, along with Jesus and many others, quoted "the Scriptures." There was no defined canon of Scripture and, thus, no Bible (as we understand it today) in the time of Jesus. The Septuagint was a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures but often included books we would classify as the Apocrypha (which are also commonly referenced in many of the epistles, although not directly called the Scriptures). Nonetheless, barring a few groups such as the Samaritans and Sadducees, the word of God was known to be just that—the divinely given instruction, guidance, and commands of God with the great and awesome history of God's interaction with His people.

¹³ Pirkei Avot 4.7.

Pirkei Avot 4 speaks of three kinds of people. One who studies the Torah simply to be able to teach it; one who studies the Torah to both teach and practice it; and one who studies the Torah simply for their own benefit. The one who simply learns for his own benefit and places the crown [of Torah] on his own head "for self-exaltation" will perish. 4.13 proceeds to say, "There are three crowns: the crown of Torah, the

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Proper 18 – Year B

At the heart of the Torah is love. The greatest commandment in the Scriptures is also not one of the 10 Commandments, it is Deuteronomy 6:5, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart.” Love (in action) is the crown of the Torah and is most often expressed towards God by our actions towards our fellow man or, as Leviticus puts it, towards our neighbour.

Who was this neighbour? Some Jewish commentators took this to mean only to your Jewish neighbours. However, this went against what was expressed in the Torah itself—namely that God shows no partiality (Deut 10:17). God's calling of Israel was to be lights to the nations. The Lord never ignored the gentiles, rather He loved the world so much that He chose the Jewish people to guard and bring His light and love to them.

James 2:1-17. James continued to speak of religion that is meaningless from his discussion on widows and orphans. God neither shows partiality nor takes bribes (Deuteronomy 10:17). We who profess to believe in Him and walk in His ways, then, should also not show partiality. Within the family of God, there are men and women, rich and poor. James highlighted and rebuked the preferential treatment of rich and poor members of God in the assembly.^{14 15}

Our admiration for those who have achieved financial success should not come at the expense of our treatment of those who have not.¹⁶ James reminded us, as does much of Church history, that it is the poor who respond most readily to the Gospel. Wealth should not be a hindrance to the Good News—sadly, many times it can be.¹⁷ To make his argument that we should show no partiality, James quoted from Leviticus 19, “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

crown of priesthood, and the crown of royalty, but the crown of a good name supersedes them all.” The one with a good name is the one who actually goes out and practices the law in an upright manner.

¹⁴ The believers, as part of the twelve tribes living in diaspora, were Jewish and were meeting in the Synagogue (συναγωγή) according to James 2:2. This was, and continued to be, the place of study and fellowship for many in the early Church.

¹⁵ Leviticus 19:15, just before what James would shortly quote, there is also the statement that preferential treatment should not be given to the poor above the rich.

¹⁶ If we are to honour someone in our community it should not be the ones who have temporal riches because of their temporal riches but rather those who do the work of God regardless of whether they have temporal riches or not. God will not judge us by our IQ or business acumen. Rather, we are all called to love our neighbour as ourself with practical, actionable love.

¹⁷ See Matthew 19:16-30

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Proper 18 – Year B

James calls this the royal law.¹⁸ As one of the two precepts that the entirety of Torah and the Prophets is fulfilled in, it is certainly important to the one who commanded it—the King of all creation, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile. The poor are just as much our neighbour as the rich and need to be treated as equals and in equal fashion. What we say and profess to believe should be supported by our behaviour, and this is not limited to the equal treatment of people.

This passage of Scripture teaches that not only should we avoid discrimination and practice egalitarianism, but it highlights the contrast between a living faith and a lifeless faith. This is summed up in James' question: can faith without good works save you? Our faith in the Lord should be expressed in our behaviour through *imitatio Dei*, the imitation of God. We should endeavour to imitate all of God's character and embrace all of God's instructions in Scripture.

James also warns us to guard against selective obedience of God's commands. Obeying the command not to murder does not give us license to disobey the command against adultery. God cares about His whole law, including the prohibition against favouritism. Our behaviour should support our words in all things. James provided the example that we cannot simply say to people, 'be warm or be fed' and expect them to be so. To fail a brother or sister in the most simple of good deeds, like giving food or shelter, reflects the heart of someone without a living faith. That is a serious statement! Faith alone saves, but that faith must be a living faith—after all, even the demons believe.

Mark 7:24-37. Jesus, having just concluded stating that what defiles a person comes from within and not from without, travelled to the Phoenician ports of Tyre and Sidon.¹⁹ Even though

¹⁸ There doesn't appear to be any other literature detailing this particular title to Leviticus 19:18, however, Jesus had previously said it was like unto, "Love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, and might." And Paul also stated, "The whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." Most Jewish scholars in the 2nd Temple and Mishnaic period understood the importance of Leviticus 19:18. See also Hebraic Perspective.

¹⁹ Phoenicia and Canaan are generally disassociated as being separate entities. The Canaanites were small city-states scattered in the southern Levant, often dominated by the Egyptian and Hittite forces to their south and north until they were, eventually, conquered by Israel. The Phoenicians, while also a series of city-states, were powerful with a trading empire that stretched across the Mediterranean. Carthage, a city founded by the Phoenicians, rivaled Rome itself for more than 100 years.

However, Phoenicia was a name given them by the Greeks but even Greek historians and geographers understood that Phoenicians were Canaanite. The northern border of Phoenicia, from the late bronze age through the Hellenistic period, was considered to be the northern border of Canaan (Anson Rainey and Steven Notley, *The Sacred Bridge* pg. 281). This also might explain why Tyre and Sidon (as Canaanite cities) were included in the tribal allotment of Asher, even though, in the end, Asher was largely integrated into Phoenicia instead. The Phoenicians also followed Canaanite religious practices—including child sacrifice. Their influence on Asher and, indeed, all of Israel was the backdrop for some of the greatest

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Proper 18 – Year B

Tyre and Sidon were foreign cities, Jesus was still a popular and recognizable figure who attracted attention. While there, Jesus stayed in someone's home that, although Tyre and Sidon were gentile and hellenistic cities, was probably Jewish.²⁰ This keeps in line with Jesus' statement that "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Mark tells us that Jesus had preferred to minister inconspicuously, but whether Jesus was known only to the Jewish population of Tyre and Sidon or the entirety of the population, this proved futile. His popularity was such that a Syrophenician (Canaanite) woman came to Jesus, interceding on behalf of her demon possessed daughter. Jesus seemed to initially try to dissuade the woman from seeking His assistance. In doing so, Jesus uses some very harsh language. In refusing her request for healing Jesus says; "Let the children be filled first, for it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs".

This verse is often taken out of context to imply that Jesus thought no more of the woman than He would an animal. Judaism, at the time of Jesus, was in the middle of an argument on how to regard gentiles. Jewish people considered many of the gentile foods, items, and even the people themselves as unclean to the touch. Gentiles worship always engaged in idolatry (which may have been the cause of the daughter's possession by a demon). At the time of Jesus the prevailing Jewish worldview included the concept that holiness, purity, impurity and cleanliness were transferable.²¹

For her part, the Syrophenician had the humility to acknowledge her standing as a Gentile. She did not react in an arrogant fashion despite coming from a nation with a greater history, power and, in their view, culture. Her faith in this foreign Jewish teacher was persistent and her request was granted because of her persistence and because Jesus did love His neighbour, just

religious battles in the Bible. Matthew understood this as he called the woman who approached Jesus as "a Canaanite woman from that region".

²⁰ Details on the Jewish population in Tyre and Sidon, in specific, are scarce, but the Jewish diaspora was significant in both the Roman and Parthian empires. One estimate, by Zvi Eckstein and Maristella Botticini, suggested that Syria and Lebanon had upwards of 200,000-400,000 Jews out of a total population of 2.3 million. While Tyre and Sidon may have had a smaller percentage of Jews than neighbouring areas, Gregory Bar Hebraeus, a 13th century scholar from Asia Minor, thought upwards of 10% of Roman [citizens] were Jewish. Meanwhile, as much as 30-40% of Alexandria may have been Jewish at this time.

²¹ The Torah describes many instances in which purity and impurity can be transferred through contact, so the basic concept is, in fact, a true one. One process to dispense of uncleanness or impurity was through the washing of water. As this story follows on from the previous hand washing debate with the Pharisees we can note that the gospel writer is making a direct link to the previous discussion.

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Proper 18 – Year B

as the Torah commanded.²² This narrative emphasized the statement Jesus made in Mark 7:14-23.

Certainly, God promised that through the offspring of Abraham all nations would be blessed. Jesus healed the Jews and the Gentiles, there was no favoritism—for the gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” It is interesting that Mark noted the direction that Jesus travelled as Jesus followed the geography laid out in Isaiah 9:1, “In the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.”²³ For from Sidon, Jesus travelled to a land beyond the Jordan, to the Decapolis region, an area once again populated with a Gentile (but also a Jewish) population. Even those who walked in darkness could see a great light.

Jesus' miracles here firmly announced the arrival of the messianic kingdom.²⁴ Jesus had given food to the hungry, made the lame walk and the blind see, and Jesus had power over demons. But it wasn't only for the spiritual rich in Jerusalem, the holy hill of God (although they were, in reality, often the spiritual poor). It was for the downtrodden, the widows and orphans, and the messianic kingdom could even reach the demon persecuted of Israel's great enemy in Phoenicia and open the ears of the Gentiles across the Jordan. While Jesus asked for the people to remain quiet about His works, all who saw could only say, “He has done all things well.” The faith and faithfulness of Jesus were displayed through His teachings and His actions. And the message of His divine activity quickly spread.

ACNA Readings

James 1:17-27. The epistle of James is addressed “to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” signifying that, for James, the primary recipients were Jewish followers of Jesus throughout the Roman Empire.²⁵ The context of the Epistle is that the wider community that James was writing

²² In a similar vein to the question of uncleanness and interaction with Gentiles, there was another argument regarding whether Leviticus 19:18, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD” only extended to the Jewish people, foreigners living within the land, or to all people. Jesus' parable about a good Samaritan made His stance clear regarding this argument. See Jewish Perspective.

²³ Rainey, Anson F., and Steven Notley. *The Sacred Bridge: Carta's Atlas of the Biblical World*. 1st ed., Carta, 2006, pp. 361-362.

²⁴ From Isaiah 9 to Isaiah 35 and Psalm 146, Jesus once again showed that He was the Messiah that God had promised. A child born from the descendants of Abraham whose name would include, “Mighty God” will sit on the throne of David, time without end.

²⁵ By the late 2nd Temple period, the time of Jesus, the Jewish people were scattered all over the world. The Greek word *διασπορά* *diaspora* refers to Jewish people who are residing outside the land of Israel and living among Gentiles. However, while the term *diaspora* is Greek, it only appeared in reference to the exile of the Jewish people—the first use of the word was expressly created for this event by the authors in the Greek translation of Deuteronomy 28:25, 30:4; Nehemiah 1:9; and Jeremiah 15:7. The

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Proper 18 – Year B

to were apparently undergoing trials.²⁶ James urged his readers to consider times of testing with joy and not with discouragement. The New Testament does not ignore suffering instead finds meaning and ultimate purpose in what happens to people.²⁷

The Epistle of James has long been misunderstood and often been characterized as an epistle that leans towards works-righteousness. However, verse 17 immediately stands against this thinking as James stated that both the perfect gifts and the generous acts of giving—that is, good works—come from God. It is not that people are doing good things to earn salvation but rather God provides the generous activity that needs to be done and the perfect gifts in which to do them. But that doesn't mean we can just hear about God and go on with our lives. A natural reaction to persecution is anger, but the righteousness of God doesn't come through natural anger—He has given us a greater, a perfect gift.²⁸ We, in response to God's gifts, should produce His righteousness.

authors of the New Testament, being Jewish, continued to use the word for that express purpose. (Only later, well after classical and Koine Greek were no longer in use, did the term *diaspora* change to a less specific context as it entered French and other scholarly languages of the 19th century. *The Dispersion: A History of the Word Diaspora* by: Stephane Dufoix)

It was within many of those Jewish communities that the good news of Jesus the Messiah first found fertile ground. Regarding the extent of the dispersion, Josephus wrote: "There is no city, no tribe, whether Greek or barbarian, in which Jewish law and Jewish customs have not taken root."

²⁶ James himself would be martyred in 62 A.D. While Jews (including Christians) would have been persecuted in various ways, the more organized form of Christian persecution that Paul seems to have referenced in his epistles only started in 64 A.D. James may have not only been referencing Roman persecution but also the persecution by Jerusalem leadership that is described regarding Paul's own early actions.

²⁷ James tells us that trials produce in us patience or endurance. The Greek word used is ὑπομονή *hypomonē* which does not carry the meaning of waiting passively but actively steadfast. Steadfast is how the first time the word faith (*emunah*) is also translated in Exodus 17:12. In Romans 5:3-5 Paul finds much meaning in his own trials when he writes; "Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."

²⁸ Anecdotally, there are times when I hear more anger from Christians undergoing [even light] persecution than I see active righteousness. And, of course, this would not be a surprise if we relied on ourselves or anyone besides God or thought that God was tempting us with evil. But maybe we should turn all that energy that we use to speak against and be angry towards our government, neighbours, work, family, etc to go visit the orphanage or hospitals. God is for us.

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Proper 18 – Year B

Throughout his epistle, James links hearing and doing together with speaking.²⁹ In this week's passage, we are encouraged to be "quick to hear, slow to speak".³⁰ Our first priority should be to hear the voice of God and to listen to Jesus. From our hearing of the teaching of Jesus, we internalize it into our hearts and from there develop the appropriate responses—leading us to good works and good speech.

James will encourage us all to be "doers of the Word"—to live out the message of the gospel. This is congruent with the teachings of Jesus who also says "But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God" (John 3:21). James will warn us that unbridled tongues reflect a deceptive heart. In this sense, the tongue is incredibly important. James continues to say that worship without a controlled tongue or proper concern for the poor, the widows, and orphans is worthless. Worship and true religion stem from the heart and are lived out in practical expressions, active love, and good speech. These are themes seen clearly in the Prophets, such as Isaiah 1:17 and Jeremiah 22:3. They are not new thoughts, just too often forgotten.

²⁹ James will expand on the need to control the tongue in chapter 3.

³⁰ Both Proverbs and the apocryphal book of Sirach would have been familiar to James, which expresses exactly the same idea, "Be swift to listen and slow to answer" (Sirach 5:11).