

Twenty-fourth Sunday – September 13, 2015

Need some wise and practical advice for trying to live according to the teachings of Jesus as preserved in the Gospels? Looking to find some concrete guidance about how to make ethical decisions in real-life situations? Look no further than our second reading today from the Letter of James.

St. James tells us we must have integrity and not tolerate a split between the faith professed with our lips and what is lived in our everyday lives. He says, in effect, “Put your money where your mouth is.”

For too long, Christianity has been seen as an “either/or” religion, when it is more properly a “both/and” religion. In a well-balanced life, there must be both thought and action. Both prayer and effort are required for the life of faith. Prayer supports and inspires effort, and effort often sends a person back to praying. As our reading from St. James puts it: “If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,’ but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is that? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, it is dead.”

If we need to go even deeper, ask this: What if Jesus stood before you or me now and asked us, as a profoundly personal question, “Who do you say that I am?” A lot rides on our answer to this question.

After all, Jesus is about a way of life. He’s about the decisions we make at business and at home. He’s about honesty and concern for others. He’s about fidelity and truth. He’s about making relationships work. He’s about keeping one’s word. He’s about life, life here and hereafter.

And he’s principled as well as merciful; demanding as well as forgiving, provided we repent; full of love indeed, but a tough love that is not content to look the other way but which desperately wants us to grow, to be decent, to be holy, to be saints. That’s the Jesus of tradition, of the gospels, quite different from many rose-colored images of him. If we don’t have this kind of a Jesus worth dying for, then he is not worth living for either.

“Who do you say that I am?” What would we say to him? It’s worth wrestling with this question all week. See if the Jesus we know excites us, challenges us, makes us nervous with his demands, yet at the same time makes us want to know more about him and follow him and love him. Does a lot ride on our answers to his question: “Who do you say that I am?” Maybe everything.