

The second reading today from the Letter of St James brings up a subject that was one of the first bones of contention between the Catholic and Protestant Reformers. It greatly occupied the mind of Martin Luther. And it is this: do good works save us, or is it faith alone? The Church has always taught that salvation in Christ is by faith *and* tradition – the traditional practices of the Church which includes good works. Luther said *sola scriptura* – faith alone saves us. He did, admittedly, say that faith will inevitably *show itself* in good works, but they are not necessary to salvation. I think the line of disagreement is actually quite thin. The Church is simply saying that yes, it is faith that saves, but faith without good works isn't really faith at all. And that is what St James is saying in the second reading.

On Monday it is the feast of St John Chrystostom, one of the great theologian saints revered in both the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. He was a 4th century bishop of Constantinople and he said in one of his homilies:

“Do you wish to honour the body of Christ? Then do not ignore him when he is naked. Do not pay him homage in the temple robed in silk, only then to neglect him outside where he is cold and shabbily dressed. He who said: ‘This is my Body’ is the same who said: ‘You saw me hungry but you gave me nothing to eat’, and ‘Whatever you did to the least of my brothers you did to me.’ (...) What good is it then, if the Eucharistic table is overloaded with golden chalices when your brother or sister is dying of hunger? Start by satisfying

their hunger and then with what is left you may adorn the altar as well.”

Faith will express itself in good works, yes – but it goes much deeper than that. Faith doesn't just come out of nowhere – faith comes out of love. Faith is an effect of love as heart is the effect of fire. In the deepest sense they're the same thing. St James asks: What about someone who claims that he had faith but hasn't done a single good work in his life? It would be like someone claiming to be a baker but has never baked so much as even a single custard cream. Faith is born of love – it is love's reflection – and love always expresses itself.

The greatest act of love expressing itself is of course creation: the most challenging question for science about existence is: Why is there something rather than nothing? Science can tell you *how* there came to be something, but not *why*. The answer that faith gives to the same question is: love is the reason why there's something rather than nothing. Everything – from an amoeba to a star cluster – is a self-expression of divine love. The human person, uniquely, can know and experience this because he has been created with self-awareness. When God looks at and into any being, he sees himself; in the human being, this gaze becomes mutual. We're made to be mirrors of God's love. This means that like all God's creatures, we have a beauty, a grace and an inestimable value but, in our case, he wants us to know it. An addict or a drunk slumped in a doorway has the same

dignity and worth in the eyes of divine love as a pope on a golden throne.

The great Sufi mystic Jalal Rumi said:

“You were born with wings – so why do you crawl through life? When you have glimpsed your own strength, when you have seen your own beauty, when you have discovered your own golden wings, you will never crawl again.”

This is because we have been created – and are held in creation – as self-expressions of divine love. And that same love yearns to go on expressing itself in our lives: in our care for others, our social conscience, our loving concern for all in need, in prayer and charity – just as St James points out. These things in themselves are not the cause of our salvation – but the love out of which they flow *is*.