

Fifth Sunday after Easter, 26th May 2019

“Religion pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: [...] to keep one’s self unspotted from this world” (Jm 1:27). Yet what exactly does St James the Less, in today’s Epistle, mean by “this world”. Yes, he obviously means planet earth, and yet not its physical aspect: “to keep one’s self unspotted from this world” therefore does not imply keeping yourself “unspotted” from the very dirt of the earth; from rolling in its mud, though it might nevertheless be best to avoid that as well! No, St James is referring to a different kind of worldly dirt; the dirt, or indeed pollution, of a moral environment contaminated by human weakness and wickedness.

“Religion pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: [...] to keep one’s self unspotted from this world” (Jm 1:27). Does that mean that it would be better for us simply to retreat from the world as a monk, nun, or hermit, so as to be “unspotted from this world”? No, not necessarily, and indeed when St James wrote his Epistle the monastic life was yet to become a feature of the Church’s life. And even if one were to retreat, as it were, from the world, one would nevertheless still be somewhere in “this world” and may even still be prone to thinking and acting in the ways of “this world”.

However we stand in relation to “this world”, whether as a priest, or someone involved with public affairs or indeed something less public, we all have to keep the world in check so as to prevent ourselves becoming spotted by it. How, though, can we possibly keep it in check, since there is no real getting away from it? Well, what is its opposite? – The world is the earth: so heaven, maybe? Alright, but go higher: who inhabits heaven, if the earth is inhabited by sinful humans? – Yes, the good God. Indeed, the Epistle presented something of a dichotomy between the “world” and “the Father”: “Religion pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: [...] to keep one’s self unspotted from this world” (Jm 1:27).

Today’s Gospel, indeed quite typical of St John’s Gospel, also presented us with an apparent dichotomy between “God” and the “world”: “I came forth from the Father and am come into the world: again I leave the world and I go to the Father” (Jn 16:28). Right from the very start of the Gospel of St John, in the Prologue, we hear of the opposition posed to God and to the Word by the world: “He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not (*In mundo erat, et mundus per ipsum factus est, et mundus eum non cognovit*)” (Jn 1:10). The “world (*mundus*)” is therefore marked by indifference and ignorance.

The priest of course says these words as part of the Last Gospel, which is not strictly speaking part of the Mass, given that it originally started, in the Middle Ages, as a private devotion following on from the Mass (that is why it is

said silently following a Sung Mass). The Last Gospel is a good way to thank the Lord after Mass and Holy Communion, focusing our attention, as it indeed does, specifically upon him: “*In principio erat Verbum, et Verbum erat apud Deum, et Deus erat Verbum* (In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God)” (Jn 1:1), etc., and upon him as “life” and “light”, “*vita*” and “*lux*” (Jn 1:4).

Then, eventually, we get to: “*In mundo erat, et mundus per ipsum factus est, et mundus eum non cognovit* (He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not)” (Jn 1:10). If Christ is characterised as “the Word”, and as “life” and “light” (Jn 1:1, 4); the world seems, consequently, to be a place plagued by ignorance, death and darkness. And yet the Word “was in the world”, though “the world knew him not” (Jn 1:10), and as the Evangelist goes on to emphasise: “He came unto his own, and his own received him not (*In propria venit, et sui eum non receperunt*)” (Jn 1:11).

All this takes us back to considering our own relationship to the world. We, like Christ, are “in the world”: but are we of the world? Like the world, do we not properly know him or receive him? Or do we, on the contrary, truly want to be “unspotted from this world” (Jm 1:27), by seeking to grow ever more in our knowledge and reception of him? The fact that the Last Gospel is, in a sense, a prayer of thanksgiving after Mass, reminds us of our reception of Holy Communion, especially when we continue reading the Gospel: “But as many as received him, he gave them power to be made the sons of God (*Quotquot autem receperunt eum, dedit eis potestatem filios Dei fieri*)” (Jn 1:12).

This connection with our receiving of Holy Communion is further strengthened, it would seem to me, by a verbal connection: the word “*quotquot* (as many)” having already occurred in the Canon, and in the part of the Canon referring particularly to Communion: “*quotquot ex hac altaris participatione sacrosanctum Filii tui Corpus et Sanguinem sumpserimus, omni benedictione caelesti et gratia repleamur* (as many who through this participation at the altar receive the most holy Body and Blood of thy Son may be filled with every heavenly blessing and grace)”. Though, as the Last Gospel will go on to explain: it is not only grace and heavenly blessing that we filled with but also divine adoption itself: “power to be made the sons of God (*potestatem filios Dei fieri*)” (Jn 1:12).

“Religion pure and undefiled before God and the Father is”, therefore, “this: [...] to keep one’s self unspotted from this world” (Jm 1:27) by knowing and receiving Christ, the one who has come into the world, so that we might follow him back to his Father and to our Father (cf. Jn 20:17): “I came forth from the Father and am come into the world: again I leave the world and I go to the Father” (Jn 16:28).