

**11 December 2022; James 5:7-10; 3 Advent; Pastor Fraser Pearce**

People who work on the land know  
That they can't control the seasons:  
They can't make the clouds rain or the sun shine.  
What they need to do is understand how the seasons work,  
And what their land is like.  
If they're wise, they work in harmony with the seasons and with the land,  
As they patiently wait for the rains to come and the crops to grow.

But if you've ever spent time on a farm, or talked with someone who has,  
You'll know that the farmer's patience is an *active* patience.  
Wise farmers do not stay in bed waiting for the rain,  
They are not idle, rather they prepare the land,  
They mend fences, they care for the animals.  
My grandparents were farmers up in Laura.  
When I stayed with them as a lad I saw that they were up before dawn,  
And that they worked until sunset.  
They had a good life as they patiently worked in harmony with the seasons,  
But their patience was an *active* patience.

This imagery of a farmer patiently waiting for the rains  
Is a key image at work in today's reading from James.  
If you can picture this imagery in your mind's eye,  
Then you'll get what James is talking about.  
And today I'm proclaiming good news from James:  
That as we patiently, *actively* await the Lord's advent,  
God is growing the fruit of His Spirit in our lives,  
And the crop that God grows will last to our good,  
And to His glory.

Here's how our reading starts: **Be *patient*, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord.**

First of all there's a command, and encouragement  
To be patient, to wait *expectantly*.  
In the context of the letter there is the aspect of waiting *patiently*  
In response to the economic injustice of the world,  
Especially workers being denied by the rich fair pay for their labour.  
But St James makes it clear what we are waiting for  
Is not simply the redress of economic injustice,

It is for the coming, the advent of our Lord in his righteousness, his justice.  
Jesus himself, in his ministry, gave his disciples teaching  
On His coming in glory,  
And He handed on different imagery for us to meditate on:  
The imagery of a bridegroom coming to the wedding banquet,  
Of a Lord returning from a trip abroad,  
Even of a thief coming in the night.  
This imagery is not meant to answer the question  
Of exactly *when* He is coming: Jesus warns us against such knowledge,  
Rather, as we meditate on the imagery  
It frees us to live lives that are spiritually prepared  
For the advent of the Lord in our own lives. We'll come back to this.

St James goes on: **The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient.**

Here St James brings in the imagery of the farmer waiting.  
The farmer is waiting for something specific and valuable:  
The crop that the land produces.  
A key part of the imagery is that there are things  
That are beyond the farmer's control:  
The early and the late rains.  
Likewise, there are many things in our own lives  
That we cannot change by our own strength.

We cannot, for example, force someone to forgive us.  
Let's say we have damaged our relationship with our spouse,  
Or family member, or friend, co-worker,  
Or with our Christian brother or sister.  
We wish we could take back what we have said or done,  
But the relationship has been harmed,  
And we are not living in harmony with them.  
We can't force them to forgive us,  
And being impatient, *demanding* that they forgive us,  
Can make things worse: But what can we do?  
What would patience look like?  
One thing it would look like is not giving up,  
Not, to use the imagery of St James, walking away from the farm.  
Trusting that God may yet send the rain of reconciliation  
Can be a wise thing to do. Likewise praying for the person involved,

Confessing your sin to them and asking for forgiveness,  
And refraining from judging them as they deal with their hurt  
Can all be good ways of farmer-like patience,  
Of wise patience that can bear a good spiritual crop.

Of course, to live this way we need strength from God.  
St James goes on to say this: **Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.**

To strengthen our hearts can mean to set ourselves to a goal,  
Just like Jesus set His face to Jerusalem.  
Think about Jesus heading to the goal of Jerusalem:  
Because He knew his goal, He could patiently suffer hardship:  
Even persecution, ridicule, and death,  
Because he knew that when a grain falls into the earth and dies,  
It produces a new crop:  
He knew that his death would lead to the resurrection, to new life.  
We can strengthen our hearts as we meditate  
On the Lord's advent, of his coming, into our lives.

Earlier I mentioned the imagery that Jesus gives us to think about His advent:  
The image of the coming bridegroom, of the returning master,  
Or even of the thief in the night.  
Again, this is not imagery that answers the question  
Of *when* Jesus will come in glory,  
And it isn't imagery that gives a scientific description  
Of *how* this will happen: rather it is imagery that our Lord gives us  
So that as we receive it and think about it,  
His Spirit can strengthen us in patience, in active waiting.  
Our Lord is coming; his justice will be brought to completion.

St James then goes on to give a specific example  
Of this patience, of this active waiting: **Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors!**  
Here St James is talking to the Christian community:  
He's talking about how we receive each other.  
Imagine that you are at a church meeting,  
And someone gets up to speak,  
And maybe inwardly, maybe even outwardly, you sigh and groan,  
Before they've even said a word.  
St James is giving us both an encouragement and a warning here:

As we patiently receive each other, God grows a good crop among us,  
But if we groan and sigh in exasperation,  
*Not at our own sins and shortcomings, but those of others,*  
Then we stand warned: our judge is standing at the doors:  
Do we want him to judge us by the way we judge our fellow Christians?  
Do we want our Lord to impatiently groan and sigh  
At our shortcomings and imperfections?

St James then leaves us with this encouragement: **As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.**

At this time of the church's year we think especially of John the Baptist,  
Who proclaimed God's word even in the face of hostility,  
Even when it led to his imprisonment and death.  
Jesus himself assures us that John was not fool,  
But that he has a greatness that is worthy of honour:  
That we can be encouraged in the face of our own difficulties  
As we consider the example of the prophets.  
But Jesus also assures us that the least in the Kingdom of Heaven  
Are greater than John the Baptist.  
Such a greatness can only come as a gift from God,  
And God is the give of good gifts...

We cannot know when the Lord will come with his glory revealed,  
But we can receive our Lord as He comes to us  
With His glory hidden under simple and humble things:  
Water, the word that is written and spoken,  
Bread and wine.

*We can receive our Lord as He comes to us at predictable times  
And in predictable places:* even here at Bethlehem, week by week.

As the Spirit draws us to receive our Lord's coming to us  
We receive the one who set His face to Jerusalem  
To save us from sin, and to bring us life with God.  
We receive the one who comes to us now  
To forgive our sin, and to grow us in love with each other,  
And the fruit that he grows in our life together  
Is the fruit of his Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience,  
Kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control,  
And this is a crop that lasts.

So let us receive our Lord, and with His advent in our lives,  
Let us live as His patient people. In Jesus' name. Amen.