



## The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

### Homily for Sunday XXIV (12<sup>th</sup> September) 2021

Martin Luther famously described the Epistle of Saint James as the *Epistle of Straw*. I have never understood how this sits with his mantra of *Sola Scriptura* - by Scripture alone. However, given his penchant for vulgar invective, I would not have wanted to challenge him on it.

If there is one phrase, which encapsulates all that is wrong with the epistle so far as Luther was concerned, it is the line from the second reading that, "If good works do not go with it, [Faith] is quite dead."

Luther's objection is invoked by another of his mantras - *sola fide* - by Faith alone. He emphasised that we are saved not through any efforts of our own - in other words, works, no matter how virtuous, but by the free gift of Faith.

I am sure that Saint James would have agreed with that sentiment. His contention is that claims to Faith when one exhibits no outward manifestation of that Faith in our choices and actions are misconceived. For him, Faith is inherently visible in the characters of the people to whom it has been truly given.

Furthermore, we might add, the works, which result from Faith, are not simply manifestations of that Faith. They also serve to sustain and develop that Faith. One has only to think of the Mass as a work of Faith to see how this is the case; but works of charity can enjoy the same function in the life of discipleship.

The gift of Faith, therefore, is not some inert treasure residing somehow within us, but a source of inspiration with a dynamic essence, which permits it to grow and develop as we respond to its promptings for our lives. This is the point made by Jesus in the *Parable of the Talents*, where the faithful servants, by using the money entrusted to them, double its worth.

We should not understand by this that we earn the growth in Faith. Rather it is an intrinsic quality of Faith that it develops as those on whom it is bestowed respond to it; in other words it contains the potential for development within itself.

We find additional confirmation of this in the Gospel reading, when Jesus asserts that anyone who would be a follower of His must, "Renounce himself, take up his cross and follow [Him]." Once again, we hear that discipleship entails in choices and actions.

Self-renunciation and self-sacrifice require at some point an act of will. Over time, we might be able to train ourselves to embrace such a response to others spontaneously - to a greater or lesser extent; but we need to make a conscious decision to follow such a course at the outset.

As Saint James points out, the life of Faith cannot be divorced from the good works it inspires: indeed, it is one of the ironies of life that, historically, those who were most committed to the notion of *sola fide* were often those who were also most prescriptive about how Christians should live.

We should not be timorous about celebrating the place of good works in the life of the Church: for they are the fruit of God's free and unearned gift of Faith.