

January 15

BLESSED JAMES DA VILLA, ALMSGIVER

Blessed James was born in Città della Pieve, in central Italy, about 1270. Trained in law, he became a defender of the poor and oppressed. At his own expense he restored a church and hospice outside the gate of Vecciano, where he cared for the poor and sick with great love. When in 1304 James defended the rights of the poor he incurred the hatred of a powerful man who then had him killed. The townspeople gave him the title of "Almsgiver," and in 1806, Pope Pius VII approved his cult.

From the common of saints and blessed of our Order, or from the common of holy men.

Office of Readings

SECOND READING

Choose one of the following readings.

From the document of the Synod of Bishops, on justice in the world. (AAS 63, [1971] pp. 930-932)

Love carries with it the absolute demand for justice

In the Old Testament God reveals himself to us as the liberator of the oppressed and the defender of the poor, demanding from his people faith in him and justice toward their neighbour. It is only in the observance of the duties of justice that God is truly recognized as the liberator of the oppressed.

By his actions and teaching Christ united in an indivisible way the relationship of each individual to God and to each other. Christ lived his life in the world as a total giving of himself to God for the salvation and liberation of all peoples. In his preaching he proclaimed the fatherhood of God toward all and the intervention of God's justice on behalf of the needy and oppressed. In this way he identified himself with the least of his people: *As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.*

From the beginning the Church has lived and understood the death and resurrection of Christ as a call to conversion in the faith of Christ and in love for one another, perfected in mutual help even to the point of a voluntary sharing of material goods.

Faith in Christ, the Son of God and the redeemer, and love of neighbour constitute a fundamental theme of the writers of the New Testament. According to Saint Paul, the whole of the Christian life is summed up in faith effecting that love and service of neighbour which involve the fulfilment of the demands of justice.

Christian lives under the interior law of liberty, which is a permanent call to turn away from self-sufficiency to confidence in God and from concern for self to a sincere love of neighbour. Thus takes place genuine liberation and the gift of self for the freedom of others. According to the Christian message, therefore, our relationship to our neighbour is bound up with our relationship to God; our response to the love of God, saving us through Christ, is shown to be effective in our love and service of others. Christian love of neighbour and justice cannot be separated. For love implies an absolute demand for justice, namely a recognition of the dignity and rights of one's neighbour. Justice attains its inner fullness only in love. Because every person is truly a visible image of the invisible God and a brother or sister of Christ, the Christian finds in every individual God himself and God's absolute demand for justice and love.

The present situation of the world, seen in the light of faith, calls us back to the very essence of the Christian message, creating in us a deep awareness of its true meaning and of its urgent demands. The mission of preaching the gospel dictates at the present time that we should dedicate ourselves to the liberation of all men and women, even in their present existence in this world. For unless the Christian message of love and justice shows its effectiveness through action in the cause of justice in the world, it will only with difficulty gain credibility with the people of our times.

RESPONSORY See 1 John 4:21; James 1:27

V. Christ Jesus has given us his commandment.

R. Those who love God must also love their brothers and sisters.

V. To care for orphans and widows in their distress is religion which is without stain or fault in the sight of God our Father.

R. Those who love ...

Alternative

Defender of the poor and oppressed

James was born in Città della Pieve, central Italy, about 1270, son of Anthony da Villa and Mostiola. A devout young boy, he frequently attended services at the nearby Servite Church. There are indications that he studied both law and letters at Siena, gaining proficiency in both. Even at that time he became concerned about the poor and the sick; he spared no sacrifice in defence of orphans, widows and the needy. Later, so as to fulfil better the commandment of the Lord, he gave all his possessions to the poor and dedicated himself completely to the care of the sick. As an example of his great love, the author of an early life of Blessed James did not hesitate to apply to him what we find in many other lives of the saints: during Mass one day James was struck by the words of the Lord: *If anyone comes to me without turning his back on his father and mother, his wife and his children, his brothers and sisters, indeed his very self, he cannot be my follower. In the same way, none of you can be my disciple if he does not renounce all his possessions.* He felt that these words were addressed to him, and so he left all and dedicated himself to the service of God and his neighbour. This description, though a commonplace in the lives of the saints, nevertheless testifies to his reputation for holiness. He restored a church and hospice which had fallen into disrepair, and there he received the poor of the town. He fed them, treated their wounds, and cared for their needs. When a powerful man of Chiusi usurped the possessions of the hospice, James defended the rights of the poor at the Roman Curia and won his case. The usurper then invited James to come to Chiusi on the pretence of desiring to resolve their differences. This avaricious man then arranged to have assassins attack and kill James on his way back to Città della Pieve. Thus James, defender of the poor and oppressed, died in 1304, giving a witness of justice and love with his own blood.

Some letters, documents and old paintings of Blessed James seem to indicate that he was not only a Servite tertiary, but that he was also a member of the Franciscan Third Order and an Oblate of the Hospice of Santa Maria della Scala in Siena. At that time it was not unusual for an individual to belong to several such groups.

In 1806 the Sacred Congregation of Rites approved the cult of Blessed James and in 1846 Pope Pius IX permitted the Servite Order to celebrate a Mass and Office in his honour.

RESPONSORY See Matthew 5:10; 1 Peter 4:14a

V. Blessed are those who are persecuted for the cause of justice.

R. Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

V. Blessed are those who are insulted for the sake of Christ.

R. Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

PRAYER

Father in heaven, your love inspired James to risk his life in defence of the rights of the poor and oppressed. Make us strong and courageous against opposition as we work for peace and justice, building a community of love. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Note: All Bible texts are taken from: The new american Bible <http://www.vatican.va/archives/>