

St James 'the Great' – Acts 11.27-12.2 & Matthew 20.20-28
Sermon for 25 July 2021 by Rev Phil Wootton

Who was St James the Apostle? Two of the original apostles were called James – James son of Alphaeus (of whom we know almost nothing and so is sometimes called James the Less) – and the better known James son of Zebedee and brother of John. He's sometimes dubbed 'James the Great' and it's him we celebrate today.

So why 'great'? He certainly was greatly privileged, a special friend of Jesus, who gave him and his brother John the nickname 'Boanerges – Sons of Thunder'. Whether they roared like thunder, or whether it's an ironic comment on their meekness, Jesus obviously liked them and kept them close. With Peter, they formed an inner group, privileged to be present on the Mount of Transfiguration, to see Jesus' appearance turn shimmering white, and privileged again in the Garden of Gethsemane to hear Jesus agonised prayers.

James' mother thought he was great. Mothers are allowed to! In Matthew's account, it was she who pulled him with John forward to request thrones to sit on when Jesus came into his kingdom, that they should rule alongside Jesus above the other disciples. I imagine their embarrassment: 'Mother! You can't ask for that!' And I imagine her reply: 'If you don't ask you won't get. You two boys are too bashful for your own good. You've got to take the opportunities that come your way if you're going to get anywhere in life.' (Of course, it could have been all their idea, just enlisting her support, we don't know.) The other disciples are indignant, as you'd expect. James and John are getting above themselves ... which doesn't mean the others wouldn't have done the same if they'd have dared. It is possible that the sons of Zebedee were a bit better off than the others, may be did think of themselves as superior. We know they were fishermen, but when Jesus called them, they left their boats to their hired men to follow him. In other words, they ran the business, not only fishing themselves. I also heard from a guide in the Holy Land that inscriptions have been found in Jerusalem referring to the house of Zebedee, which suggests James and John were perhaps country cousins to a moderately significant family.

Whatever their background, Jesus is clear: it does not make them great. Lording it over others is for the pagans, not for the people of God: in God's kingdom, whoever wants to be first must take on the servant role. Leadership is service, not status. Nevertheless, James' mum hadn't got it all wrong. Jesus was about to come into his kingdom. He was about to head to Jerusalem for what would be his triumphal entry – a new David entering his city. But Jesus' reign would begin like nothing she or anyone else had imagined. To any observer, it would be utter and abject defeat – abandoned by friends, captured by enemies, and executed in the most public, degrading and shameful of ways. And yet, to the discerning eye, his reign began on that cross. It was the reign of self-giving, sacrificial, suffering love; the reign of total innocence taking on all that evil could throw at him, absorbing its sting and breaking its power. This is the ultimate service that Jesus the Son of Man could do for the human race. This was his life given as a ransom for the life of many, a ransom payment received by joining the way of servant love.

‘Can you drink the cup that I drink?’ Jesus asked James and John. ‘We can,’ said the Boanerges, with naïve enthusiasm. ‘You will,’ said Jesus, prophetically. James would drink the cup of martyrdom, the ultimate service. As reported in Acts 11, he was executed by Herod Agrippa, probably in the year 44 AD. He was the first of the Twelve to receive martyrdom. Stephen the Deacon had already been stoned to death, and most of the other apostles would eventually follow. James’ death is given just one line in Acts of the Apostles – as opposed to two chapters dedicated to Stephen. Perhaps not much was known about the details, or perhaps the message had got through about service being self-effacing. James was great because he had learnt the servant message, and gave up his life as his Lord and Master had done. The greatness lies in his death as a faithful servant bearing witness to Jesus Christ.

Most of us as Christians naturally accept the call to service, although we would hope that it will not require that ultimate surrender of our lives. For many, one of the great frustrations of the last year has been to be denied the opportunity to serve because of being deemed too vulnerable. It may be now (or soon) is the time to pick up the baton (or the tea towel) again. We each have our own calling – whether to the washing up bowl or the lawnmower, the accounting software or the committee room, or indeed to the altar table. When we do so (as we should), we must be as alert to the moral and spiritual dangers as we are to those concerning our health.

Fallen human nature has the habit of turning even the best intentions of service into a quest for power, status or control. The church is notorious for making a mess of Jesus’ instruction that the first shall be last and the last first. It’s not all about scrambling for a place on the back pew! ... Or, when passing through a door, making it take five minutes as each says, ‘After you.’ ‘No, after you.’ ‘No, after you.’ At the highest level, popes have a wonderful title – ‘servants of the servants of God’ – but can you think of an institution that historically has been more caught up in power struggles?

We talk about volunteering for service, and that’s great, but then it’s easy to say, ‘I’m a volunteer: if you don’t do things my way, I can give my time to something else.’ That’s like the child saying, ‘It’s my ball: if you don’t let me win, I’m going home and taking my ball with me.’ We should test our own hearts rigorously so we don’t fool ourselves, and damage others as a result.

Two things, then, in conclusion: first, at this time when of the easing of restrictions, let’s make sure we’re not only dreaming of enjoying ourselves but thinking how we can now be free to serve others. And, second, when we do take up the washing up gloves again, let’s be sure we’re not doing it to draw attention to the soap suds on our hands; and when we return to meeting in person, let’s try not to boast how full our diaries have become.

When Jesus left Jericho after his encounter with James and John’s mum, two blind men by the roadside. called out, ‘Son of David have mercy on us.’ Jesus healed them of their blindness straightaway. It took all the terrible and wonderful events of Jesus’ arrest, crucifixion and resurrection for James and John to be cured of their blindness. What will it take for us?