

The pathway of discipleship

Festival of St James 2019

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne, St James and All Saints

Keynote Bible Readings: Mark 1.14 – 20, Matthew 20.20 – 28

This morning on the Feast Day of St James we follow, with him the *path of discipleship*.

James and his brother John were sons of Zebedee and we are introduced to them as being fishermen. Probably like Peter and Andrew, also fishermen, they had made early acquaintance with Jesus, and on the invitation, they left off mending their nets and became the first disciples and subsequently were also called to be apostles.

In this sermon you are invited to follow the pathway of James and observe what he observed and experienced with Jesus. Then to see how these relate to our following in the pathway of discipleship.

- 1) First then – *being called*'. No problem for James, we are told they simply left their nets to the hired men and went with Jesus. Each of us is called, and we have chosen to follow Jesus. We follow this path. There's times like the poem 'Footprints' when the way has not been easy, or we have considered alternative choices. Yet it is like the Psalm, 'thy rod and staff they comfort me.'
- 2) Second, *discipleship is about learning*. The thing about learning is one doesn't always get it right, but hopefully learn from the experience. This was certainly how it was for James. When they were called to be followers, they were given a nickname 'Boanerges', sons of thunder. Was it their deep voices, or their character? Perhaps they were somewhat full on in their support of Jesus. Thus when the discipleship group were passing through Samaria and the locals weren't too enthusiastic in their receiving Jesus, James and John suggest to him he calls down heavenly tempest on the village. No, responds Jesus that's not my way.

Another incident was a learning experience, when a discussion arose among the disciples about who would be the greatest, and to sit at places on Jesus right and left. James and John ask for that privilege. Call it ambition. That request earns a rebuke from Jesus. This learning experience on the path of discipleship is about servanthood, This servanthood would include suffering. Matthew's account puts this request in the mouth of Jesus' mother. But Mark and Luke place it squarely as coming from James and John.

What *learning experiences do we* encounter in following Jesus? It may be in praying we get the message - not now, rather wait. For me in ministry its not always been how I'd hoped – hoping for being vicar of a particular parish, and it never eventuated. Or in parish ministry having what I'd describe as a dose of burnout when vicar of a parish with four churches, and trying to achieve too much.

3) The pathway of discipleship is to *experience the sacred*. This was given to James in full measure. He was very privileged, being invited to share with Jesus along with only Peter and John. To be present at the healing of Jairus' daughter – who Jesus said had died, and then is miraculously restored to life. Then to be present when Jesus went up the hill and was transfigured, receiving his Father's commendation, 'This is my Son, with him I am well pleased. Listen to him.' Then towards the time Jesus would be arrested, leading up to his trial and what he would go through, it is James, again with Peter and John who are taken into the Garden of Gethsemane and he asks them to watch and pray. Another is after the resurrection of Jesus, the fishermen disciples have returned to their former occupation. But no fish, until the 'stranger' bids them throw the net on the other side of the boat. And a catch is successful. They recognise the stranger is Jesus and he shares bread and fish, a symbol of eucharist, thanksgiving.

I've pondered why it was Jesus took those three and gave them special experiences. From accounts in the Acts of the Apostles it would seem they were being trained for leadership of the early church. By these experiences they witnessed the nature of the divine Son of God. Thus their faith is built up and they are leaders of the discipleship group.

As followers of Jesus we also are given spiritual experiences, thus building our faith.

Let me share some examples of times when this might occur. These include the experience of worship, of the wonder of being in God's creation. (We were certainly reminded of this last week with the views of Planet Earth taken from the moon on the 50th anniversary of landing).

Then also in what I describe as '*serendipity experiences*', those unexpected meetings or occurrences giving one a realisation they were 'meant to be.' That's not a common word, and it is defined as the occurrence and development of events by chance in a happy or beneficial way. It could be to regard the care of the good Samaritan as a gospel example – translated as 'by chance'. Or was it perhaps 'it was meant to be.'

James with Peter and John they were given a divine experience of seeing Jesus transfigured and awareness of the voice of the divine. Reflecting back I remember the visit to St Paul's in London attending a Eucharist service. There was a strong sense of divine presence and of years of worship, the place of that church and its history. Similarly attending Mass in Chartres Cathedral in France. When I went in it seemed quite dark after being outside, and surrounded by gloriously coloured stained glass windows. Tears came to my eyes as a visiting choir began to sing. Then also being invited to preach on a healing theme in St Andrew's Cathedral Sydney.

There's numbers of times in God's creation, of a sense of divine presence, the 'lived moment' when all seems alive. In that context also its interesting to note Jesus took the three up a mountain for their experience.

Think of the three with Jesus to Jairus' house as he went to bring healing to his daughter, also a sacred experience. For me there's numbers of healings witnessed. Most often the prayer goes with medical treatment and would seem to hasten the healing. I well remember a particular healing miracle. Some years ago it was of a parishioner in her 40's who had a MS diagnosis, and there was increasing medication as the condition progressed. It got to the point of her needing to be in a wheelchair. We prayed in constancy for healing and anointed her with blessed oil, then trusted in God. Her specialist was concerned for the possible outcome and wasn't at all sure the medication was being effective. So he advised to stop and review before continuing. It was then realised the MS had receded and she was able to resume her life. We sure praised God for the healing that happened.

Then Gethsemane, a special prayer experience of the three to be aware of Jesus' agony prior to his arrest and trial and of his faithful prayer, 'Not my will but yours be done.' In this respect taking opportunity for regular retreats, focussing on God's leading and speaking through the silence, meditation and reading.

I've mentioned also the serendipity experience on the morning at the beach and Jesus sharing the bread and fish, a Eucharistic experience.

Surely then Peter, James and John would have realised their great privilege of experiencing Jesus in his divinity as well as his humanity. For me, for us also those special moments, sometimes fleeting, experiencing, realising God is truly present are given to encourage us in our faith. Thus we continue on the path of discipleship.

In summary then returning to discipleship meaning learning, looking on at the gospel story we can see how Jesus took James with Peter and John and gave them special equipping and how they were to be, as servants. Whilst not to the same intensity for us being called means we also have encountered learning experiences along the way. And rejoicingly, also those assurances from sacred experiences. As is said in the service: 'The Lord is here. God's Spirit is with us.'

