

St James' Day 2022

I'm sure most of you know who our patron saint was but I'd like to look at what sort of disciple he was - and what that might mean for those of us who are his flag bearers.

A quick overview first to place him in history - our St James was the brother of John and son of Zebedee, a family of fisherman (see Matt 4:21-22 and Mark 1:20) is also known as James the Greater or Elder. Not to be confused with the other St James is called the younger or lesser - only because he was not one of the original 12 disciples or apostles - in fact I think he was pretty great as an epistle writer in the New Testament, and not least was Jesus's brother.

The first we learn of our James is in Matt 4:21-22 and Mark 1:20) when Jesus calls him and his brother John away from the family business by the Sea of Galilee to become 'fishers of people'. What was their response? Did they sit down and draw up a new business plan and consult with family members or other stakeholders? They didn't even ask if was a stipended or non-stipended, part time or full time ministry position...No - They left immediately - the word used in both gospel accounts - to follow the young rabbi Jesus - to follow his way his truth his life. 'They watched and learned on the job - teaching and healing, proclaiming and being the good news of God's coming Kingdom. No pay, but there was prejudice and persecution, Indeed, as the church age began, James was the first apostle to be killed - probably the first Christian martyr. I think that's what the nail on shield refers to. As we learn in Acts 12:2, he paid the ultimate price of discipleship, sharing in Jesus's life, death, and afterlife.

In their life on Earth together, James and John became two of Jesus 'closest friends, in the "inner circle" of disciples (see Matthew 17:1), We assume this position -afforded only to James, John, and Peter - is because they are frequently mentioned together as the only apostles to witness some of Jesus 'miracles: the raising of a young girl from the dead (Mark 5), for example. Also, Jesus took James up a mountain along with Peter and John, where James saw Jesus 'transfiguration and watched Him talk with Moses and Elijah (Matthew 17:1-9).

James and his brother, John, were given a nickname by Jesus, who called the two "Boanerges," which means "sons of thunder". Mark 3:17 is the only place in Scripture that mentions this designation and there is no stated explanation as to why Jesus named them this. I imagine it's more to do with their personality type - than anything to do with their parents, but who knows - as we see them emerge in Scripture as characterized by zeal, passion, and ambition.

In one vivid incident, James and John manifest some truly thunder-like qualities. Jesus and His disciples were traveling through Samaria on their way to Jerusalem when they ran into trouble. Jesus attempted to find accommodation for the night in one place, but was met with opposition from the villagers, simply because His destination was Jerusalem—a result of Jew-Samaritan prejudice. "When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, 'Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?'" (Luke 9:54). Jesus rebuked the brothers, and they all went to another village. James and John's response to the Samaritans reveals fervency, impetuosity, and anger, which rightly earned Jesus 'correction - he reminded the sons of thunder that His mission was to save lives, not destroy them.

And as our gospel reading today from Matthew 20 (v20-28) reveals, they were pretty ambitious - maybe their Mum who fronted the request to Jesus, cultivated it in them. Earlier in Matt 20 we have a parable of the workers in the vineyard - those hired at the end of the day received the same pay as those hired earlier. It's about God's grace and generosity and – despite hearing Jesus summing up

this teaching with “so the last shall be first, and the first will be last” - Jesus ’disciples are slow on the uptake.

The mother of James and John asks Jesus to grant her two sons the most prominent places in his coming kingdom. . Jesus takes this opportunity to challenge their notions about prominence. These two men are standing there and Jesus turns to them and asks, “Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” They respond, “We are able.” Course we can...Jesus then tells them that wasn’t a request He could grant, but they would get to drink from his cup - the death he’d just predicted.

The other ten disciples weren’t happy at all with the brothers because of their brazenness— I suspect because they wanted those positions of honour in the kingdom for themselves (verse 24).

Jesus spells out that greatness in His kingdom won't look like the authority of the Gentile rulers “lording it over them” The key performance indicators in the disciples’ job description are sacrifice and suffering - and part of the package in working for God’s kingdom. Change your attitude, Jesus implies - being first is about servanthood, the greatest of all will be the one who serves the others as a slave - and follow Jesus in the way of sacrifice. So Jesus turns the request around into a lesson in humility for all the disciples. Jesus sets the pattern by the example of his own actions, and we show ourselves to be Christ-followers by following his example. Are we up for it?

A bit more about James...After the ascension of Christ, James was present on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) and did his part in fulfilling the Great Commission. Given James ’outspoken nature, he was probably a bold witness for the Lord and led many to faith.

His life shows us that Jesus knows our nature - identified James as a “son of thunder” right away. Also, Jesus patiently works with us to use our attributes and transform these for good, our perceived weaknesses can become strengths. We also learn from his life that courage in our service to Christ is a valuable asset in spreading the gospel—although it can make us the target of persecution (or in our society more likely an object of ridicule). At the same time, boldness should not be allowed to descend into brashness. Our zeal must be tempered with grace, and impetuosity must be curtailed by attentiveness to God’s promptings.

May I encourage you, as spiritual heirs of James, to listen for God’s call, and respond, as doers of the word? When God gets our attention, it may be a positive or negative experience - sometimes through the words of other people. It’s often that still small voice of calm we perceive when we make time to listen to God —through Scripture, prayer and reflection. Let’s be open to those kairos moments when God stops us in our tracks and we have to decide what we are going to do about it. Above all, Prayer is essential in discerning God’s word and the action required.

This year I have witnessed you as a Faithful community - an experience I’ve been grateful to have had - and with my contract here finishing end of August to go wherever God calls after this. I will continue to pray for you, to grow in your giftings as disciples, as a faithful -and fruitful - community of God’s people. Amen.