

## 26<sup>th</sup> July 2020 – James, Apostle & Martyr – Chris’s Sermon

Matthew 20: 17-28 (James the great)

As I said at the beginning of our service, today we gather to celebrate the feast day of Saint James – James the son of Zebedee – James the great. According to scripture, James the great was one of the first disciples to join Jesus, along with his brother John. He was one of three disciples chosen by Jesus to journey to the top of the mountain – he was a witness to the transfiguration. He was part of the inner circle of followers – he followed Jesus until he was eventually put to the sword by Herod – and martyred for his faith. Today, he’s honoured as the patron saint of Spain, the Philippines and parts of Mexico – he’s also the patron saint of veterinarians, tanners, pharmacists and woodcarvers.

But, in a way, today I’d like to talk a bit about this idea of greatness. In our western calendar, today we honour James the great – but perhaps we should begin by asking what makes James great? Well, in the calendar, James is given the title great to distinguish him from James the lesser (James the son Joseph or Alphaeus – depending on your tradition – one of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem). James the great is honoured as one of the first disciples – one of the first followers of Jesus.

In our Gospel today, Jesus shares a very interesting conversation with his disciples about greatness; the conversation begins with the mother of James and John asking that he honour her sons – allowing them to sit at his left and right hand, in the kingdom of God. In a way, this reading reminds me of an earlier conversation shared by the disciples in Mark 9, when we see the disciples bicker and argue among themselves – about who will be the greatest disciple. Like that conversation, this seems to be quite shallow – it’s more concerned with personal glory and greatness than service and sacrifice.

Our reading begins with Jesus talking about his sacrifice – he talks about his condemnation and betrayal – he talks about being mocked, humiliated and put to death – he talks about his suffering on the cross.

Jesus isn’t interested in dreams of glory and power – he’s not interested in personal glory or greatness. As always, Jesus is interested in the way – he’s interested in a journey of faith that becomes our life’s work. ‘...whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant...’ The disciples talk about a seat of honour – they talk about their own glory – they talk about their reward for faith and service (again, they seem to be concerned about who will be the greatest). And, the contrast between Jesus and his disciples is laughable.

Jesus responds to the disciples by talking about the will of God (God’s greatness) – he talks about the way – he cuts through their blindness. He talks about a greatness that can only be touched by the humble – the generous – the loving.

And, as unbelievable as it sounds, Jesus calls the disciples to experience this greatness by sacrificing themselves – giving themselves to God’s will. And, he offers his own life as an example of this service.

They are called to live the way – to give themselves to a journey of faith – to befriend the lonely and the outcast – to comfort the sick and the suffering – to welcome the child – to be loving and generous.

While James and John dream about their reward – the final destination – the journey’s end (glory and honour in the kingdom), Jesus is much more interested in the journey itself. Humble and obedient, he’s interested in God’s will – he’s interested in growth and change and the renewal of the world.

Again, for Jesus, greatness isn't a reward that we earn – a destination to be reached. No, instead, greatness is the cup that we share – it's a life of service. And, through the example of Jesus, we're also reminded that this greatness is experienced among many trials and tribulations – a long life filled with unexpected twists and turns. (Even the greatest will experience pain and suffering, loss and death – there are no guarantees.) I think this is what Jesus is trying to say to them.

I wonder if perhaps this might have some relevance to us today, as we consider the ministry that we are called to share. Within the church, we discover people of many different faiths and beliefs. All too often, we focus our attention on the issues that divide us and separate us. Often, we are more concerned with making our case – defending our beliefs and actions, while dismissing those who are different – the outsider – those we consider uninformed or complacent. At times, I think we can be a bit like the mother of James and John – overly concerned with personal glory and reward – distracted from the ministry that gives meaning to our calling.

In a way, I think our reading serves to remind us to remain attentive to this calling – to look beyond our sense of greatness, which often limits our willingness to serve. The example of Jesus calls us to remain humble. To celebrate the ministry that others offer, even when we don't share their viewpoint – their perspective.

As our Gospel suggests, we are called to look beyond our smallminded differences and our ambition – we are called to serve.

Again, in the words of our Gospel, ‘..whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant...whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all ...’  
The Lord be with you.