

Oct 23, St James

Today is St James' day. There were two St James in the Bible: today's James is sometimes called St James the Greater, as distinguished from James the lesser, the author of the Epistle, whom we celebrate with St Philip on May 1st.

We don't know much about James the Greater. He and John were sons of Zebedee. James, with Andrew and Peter, became a specially chosen trio, particularly close to Jesus, the three who were present with Jesus on some crucial occasions, for instance, at the raising of Jairus' daughter, on the mount of the Transfiguration, and in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of Jesus' agony. But though we don't know a great deal about him, there is enough in James' story for us to think about what it means to be a disciple. Maybe there are three things that we can start with: character, servanthood, and anonymity.

Character

James and his brother John were nicknamed *Boanerges* - Sons of Thunder. They were impulsive and quick to anger. The gospel tells us that when the people of a certain Samaritan village would not receive Jesus, James and John said, 'Lord, do you want us to torch the place?' (a rough translation!). Jesus said not! Perhaps because of his zeal, James was singled out by Herod Agrippa to be the first martyr among the twelve apostles—not the sort of place of honour in the kingdom of God that he had hoped for!

An apostle with a temper, with zeal, with passion, with energy is, at least for some of us, a comforting image. It means there is hope for us all. There is a widely held view that Christians should be 'nice': quiet, obedient, meek and mild. This is absolute rubbish. There is not anywhere in Holy Scripture where niceness is ever demanded. Jesus was not nice: he could be provocative, cheeky, offensive even. Only in the worst examples of Children's hymns (and there are plenty) do we find the idea that Christians should be meek and mild. Christians are called to be *themselves*, and to allow their own characteristics—*whatever they may be*—to be used for the Kingdom of God. If we are full of passion, let us be passionate for the Lord. Whatever skills and gifts we have, let us put them to use in the Lord's service. If we get things wrong, no matter. So did James. We all make mistakes. Do not hide your light under a bushel!

Servant

The story of James the greater tells us that we never know where the journey of discipleship will lead. Scripture tells us that James and John asked Jesus if they could sit either side of Jesus, as if to support their Master and share in what they thought would be glory. Jesus told them 'You don't know what you're asking. Can you suffer as I will?' Their answer is confident - 'We can.' And they did, but I'll bet you it wasn't what they thought it was going to be. I'll bet you they didn't think it would end in martyrdom. The message is that we don't know where following Jesus will lead, but we have to be ready to move, to change and to rethink our priorities. We have to be ready to change our minds. We have to be ready to be disturbed.

All through Scripture, God comes as a *disturber*. Jesus throughout his ministry certainly comforted the disturbed, but time and again we hear of him disturbing the comfortable. He had it in for the complacent, the self-important, the comfortable. Jesus condemns very little, but he always condemns hypocrisy and complacency.

Following the Lord means that we have to accept that we can be wrong. Following the Lord means that we have to accept that there might be a different viewpoint, a different way of looking at things, to the one that we have been so passionate about up to that moment. The ways of God's kingdom are not the ways of the politically powerful. Its kingship is the kingship of a servant: its liberty is found in willing obedience to God. Its warfare is not with weapons and force. Its struggles and conflicts are much deeper and more crucial—they are the battles that go on in our heads concerning pride, hypocrisy, envy and ambition, wanting to be noticed and praised. 'Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who took upon himself the form of a servant, and became obedient even unto death.'

The triumph of this sort of servanthood is a renewal of spirit - a renewal of mind. In his words, and in his passion, Jesus shows that liberty is not to be found in worldly power, pride and ambition and satisfying worldly desires, but rather, in the denial of all these. In the replacement of selfishness by selflessness. In detachment, in fact.

What a hard lesson that is! At our baptism we are pledged to renounce the world, the flesh, and the devil: we are renounce the vain pomp and glories of this wicked world. In this land at this time, and throughout Europe, we see the ruinous effects of worldly ambition and greed as people lose their jobs, their homes and their self-esteem. We certainly need to rethink our priorities. The story of James tells us that following Jesus will not lead to fame and worldly glory. We have to be prepared to let go of the things that we once thought mattered the most.

Anonymity

Who are the people you remember from childhood? Maybe the neighbour who was consistently kind. Maybe the teacher who took special trouble. So often it's the little things that mean the most, especially when we look back from afar. I'll bet it wasn't the Mayor, or the government minister, or the chairperson of this or that

society. I'll bet it wasn't the person after whom a street was named. Following the Master, as James discovered, means that there will be no plaques erected to your glory. There will no roads named after you. It means that you may be forgotten by the big people, but almost certainly remembered by individuals for what you did for them. It's the one-to-one stuff that matters the most, and the truth is that we can never tell today what effect a small gesture or action will have tomorrow.

Today we keep the festival of an Apostle and Martyr. An Apostle is one who is sent; and a Martyr is one who witnessed: 'As the Father hath sent me, so send I you'; 'You shall be my witnesses'. We too can be apostles and witnesses, sent to contradict this world in which the Princes of wrongdoing hold sway.

We will have to let go of all sorts of things that we thought mattered to us, and it may be painful journey, but the delights of doing so are incalculable.