

## JAMES, APOSTLE AND MARTYR

Jeremiah 45. 1-5

Acts 11. 27-12. 2

Matthew 20. 20-28

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

Today we keep the festival of St James, the Apostle and Martyr. This St James is to be distinguished from the other St James, the author of the Epistle, whom we celebrate along with St Philip on May 1st.

Of James the Apostle and Martyr, we know really very little from Holy Scripture, except that he was called to be a disciple with his brother John; and with Andrew and Peter, he became one of the specially chosen three disciples who were particularly close to our Lord. They were present with Jesus on many 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 Christ's agony.

James and his brother John were nicknamed *Boanerges* – ‘Sons of Thunder’ – implying that they had ardent and impulsive zeal. You will remember, for example, their indignant zeal when they left the inhospitable Samaritan village. The people would not receive Jesus: ‘and when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?”’ But he turned and rebuked them (Lk 9. 51-56). Perhaps because of his evident zeal, James was singled out by Herod Agrippa to be the first martyr among the twelve apostles, thus obtaining one of those places of honour in the kingdom of God which he and his brother had desired and hoped for; drinking the cup of Christ's suffering and being baptised with the baptism of Christ's death.

The zeal of James and John is seen clearly in our gospel passage. They are zealous for fame and recognition: not in worldly terms necessarily, but on an eternal scale; and they send their poor mother Salomé to our Lord to ask for special seats in heaven.

Jesus says to Salomé (and to James and John, who have come along with her by the way), 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?' And they reply without hesitation, 'We are able'.

James and John seem to be zealous to pay the price of glory, and indeed they are destined to pay the price; but they do not understand what that glory is. The assumptions behind their request are wrong. Suddenly, all of the disciples begin to argue about precedence in the kingdom of God; and they all miss the mark. Christ says to them, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It must not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be great among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

'It must not be so among you.' The ways of God's kingdom are very different; its pryncedom and authority are of a very different kind. Its kingship is the kingship of a servant: its liberty is found in willing obedience. Its warfare is not with clash of arms and noise of battle. Its struggles and its conflicts are much deeper and more crucial than that, for its battles are the battles of the human spirit; and its enemies are the subtle and deadly demons of greed, vain ambition, pride, envy, hypocrisy and all such perversities of spirit.

As Paul exhorted the church in Philippi, 'Let this same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross' (2. 5, 8).

In his words, and in his passion, our Lord proclaims that liberty is not to be found in worldly power, worldly pride, ambition and the satiety of worldly desires - but rather, in the denial of all these. 'My kingdom', says Jesus, 'is not of this world' (Jn 18. 36). The signs of his glory are the signs of his humility, of his suffering, of his passion. The signs of his glory are the signs of body broken and blood poured out.

And that is the glory which we set forth day by day in the liturgy of the Church, as we break the bread and drink the cup, proclaiming his death until he comes in glory. 'Imitate what you celebrate' says the ancient wisdom of the Church. We break the bread and we drink the cup; we are to imitate what we celebrate. As St Paul writes to the church in Corinth, 'The cup of blessing that we bless, is not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?' (1 Cor 10. 16).

What a hard lesson that is for us to learn! At our baptism, we pledged to renounce the world, the flesh, and the devil; we pledged to renounce the vain pomp and glory of this world. And surely it is evident enough that this pomp and glory are vain, and that to trust in them leads us up the wrong path. Yet over and over again, every day - in a thousand little ways, in our relations with one another; in the things that we wish for; and the things we rebel against - we are tempted, and deluded, and taken in. Over and over again, we must be recalled by the passion of our Saviour and the witness of the saints: 'It must not be so among you.' And 'Let this same mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus.'

Each day – today, tomorrow, and this week – we are called to make space for the coming of God’s kingdom in us. ‘The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning, great is your faithfulness’ (Lam 3. 23-25). Yes, God’s kingdom is new every morning, and it continues to come in us.

‘Thy kingdom come’, in me, in you, here and now at St Stephen’s, in this particular situation and in this particular moment.

Today we keep the festival of an Apostle and Martyr. An Apostle is one who is sent; and a Martyr is one who witnessed. To celebrate such a festival is to remind ourselves that we too are called to apostleship and to a sort of martyrdom. Our Lord said, ‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you’ (Jn 20. 21); and ‘You shall be my witnesses’ (Acts 1. 8). We too are *sent* - sent to *witness* to that new life which is God's kingdom within us; sent to contradict this world in which the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them.

‘It must not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be great among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’

Amen.