

THE FEAST OF ST 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 celebrate the festival of St James, Apostle and Martyr. This St James is sometimes referred to as St James the Greater, and can be distinguished from the other Apostle named St James, the author of the Epistle, whom we celebrate along with St Philip on May 1st.

Of St James the Greater, we know several things from Holy Scripture. Called with his brother St John, and with St Andrew and St Peter, he became one of the specially chosen three disciples who were particularly close to Jesus. These three were present with our Lord on many crucial occasions, including the raising of Jairus' daughter; the Transfiguration; and the night of Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane.

St James and his brother, who were the sons of Zebedee, were also nicknamed Boanerges – ‘Sons of Thunder’ – by Jesus in another gospel.¹ They both had ardent and impulsive zeal, and this was revealed by their indignation concerning the inhospitable Samaritan village. According to the gospel of St Luke, the people in one Samaritan village did not want to 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.²

Perhaps because of his evident zeal, St James was singled out by Herod Agrippa to be the first martyr amongst the twelve apostles, thus obtaining one of those places

¹ Cf. Mk 3. 17.

² Cf. Lk 9.51-56.

of honour in the kingdom of God which he and his brother had desired and hoped for; indeed, St James did drink the ‘cup’ of Christ's suffering³ in the end.

Ambition can be a funny thing. It's not always a bad thing, since it's a necessary trait when it comes to setting and achieving goals for oneself or for an organisation. But when it becomes an end in itself, and when it loses any sense of balance and ceases to consider its effect on others...well, then it can corrupt. Yes, the overly ambitious, those obsessed with achieving their own ends regardless of the consequences, can become very ruthless people.

Most of us have probably known or worked for a few such people. Many years ago, I worked for one for about four years, and it was not a pleasant experience. My boss ended up letting his overreaching ambition cloud his sense of morality, and the consequences of this were very unfortunate, for him and for others.

We get a little taste of runaway ambition in our Gospel reading from St Matthew. St James and his brother ask their mother to intervene on their behalf and to present their request to Jesus. Their request is not a small one, either: it is to have the highest places of honour in heaven.

Our Lord, of course, is not fooled; and he responds directly to St James and St John. Recognizing the potential for corruption in their ambition, he nips it in the bud by asking them, ‘Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?’ Without fully understanding what they are agreeing to, they say they can. Jesus concurs with their agreement, because he knows what awaits them. The two disciples are zealous to pay the price of glory, and indeed they are destined to pay it: but they do not understand what that true glory is.

³ The image of the cup reappears in the accounts of Jesus' Last Supper (Mt 26. 27) and his prayer in Gethsemane (26. 39, 42).

True glory, according to Jesus, is servanthood. 'It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first 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 a ransom for many' (20. 25-26).

The ways of God's kingdom are very different, aren't they? Kingdom power and authority are of a very different kind. Those who would aspire to be kings or queens, are to be servants; and those who seek freedom are called to obedience. The battles won in this kingdom are not won with the clash of arms and the noise of battle. They are won as people like you and me willingly forsake greed, vain ambition, pride and envy. The triumphs of this kingdom are your and my decisions to allow God to renew our minds and to help us keep a fresh, godly perspective on what true status really is.

In this, our Lord is ever the perfect example. 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 his body broken, and his 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.

Today we celebrate the festival of an Apostle and Martyr. An Apostle is one who is sent: 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you';⁴ and a Martyr is one who has witnessed: 'You will be my witnesses'.⁵ To celebrate the festival of St James is to recall that we too are sent, sent to witness to that new life which is God's kingdom within us; and we are sent, sent to contradict this world and to show others that servanthood is our true glory.

Amen.

⁴ Cf. Jn 20. 21.

⁵ Cf. Acts 1. 9.