

## **Address on the Feast of St James 2021 by Nigel Guthrie**

The Tokyo Olympics have finally started, albeit a year late. So, over the next few weeks athletes will be tested to see who is strongest, fastest and most skilful; their endurance and team work will be on show and medals will be awarded for the winners. The very best will have gold, silver or bronze hung around their necks in a moment of pride that will stay with them forever and cheer the hearts of their teammates and supporters. Athletics and sport can bring out the very best of discipline and achievement in people.

But the Christian faith gives the greatest prize to other qualities, as we read in today's gospel. Jesus said '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.'

Today we celebrate the life and witness of St James, or St James the Great, apostle and martyr as he is sometimes known. Not that we really know very much his life. His father was Zebedee and he and his brother John were fisherman whom Jesus called to follow him while they in their boat mending the nets. From today's reading from Matthew we might assume that James and John had an ambitious, not to say pushy, mother because she asked Jesus if her sons could sit at his right hand and left hand in his kingdom. But in fact this is a rewriting of the same passage in Mark in which James and John ask the same for themselves. It seems that Matthew thought it rather embarrassing to suggest that these great apostles should have been quite so self-seeking. But then they were called 'sons of thunder' in Mark's gospel which suggest that they were pretty feisty and perhaps even hot tempered. This is borne out by a short passage in Luke's gospel where they want to call down fire on a town that had not received Jesus well. But Jesus rebuked them. On the other hand James and John were among only three disciples, along with Peter, who were privileged to be present on the mountain when Jesus was transfigured.

Perhaps it was James' outspoken and fiery nature that led to his death by the sword in Jerusalem during the persecution of Christians by Herod Agrippa recorded in Acts chapter 12. This is widely thought to have taken place in AD 44 making James the first of the Apostles to be martyred. So today's gospel reading is especially poignant as the words of Jesus about giving up his own life as a ransom for many seems to find an echo in the death of his feisty but faithful follower, James.

It was a later tradition that associated James with Spain and led to the widespread recognition of Santiago de Compostela as his place of burial and one of the foremost places of Pilgrimage in medieval Europe. I know that at least some of our own parishioners have walked the pilgrimage routes, as I have myself. And today, when St James' Day falls on a Sunday it is declared a Holy Year in Compostela and on this day a special door in the East End of the Cathedral is opened in celebration. So, if you see a saint's image carved in Europe in the past 1000 years who has a walking stick, a pilgrim hat and a scallop shell you can be sure it is meant to represent St James.

The Epistle which is set for this special day is a wonderful passage which starts with St Paul saying 'We have this treasure in clay jars (or earthenware vessels – as it is sometimes translated), so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and not to us.' Paul goes on to describe how we are afflicted but not crushed, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.

Here Paul seems vividly aware of his own weakness. The clay jar is fragile. It can easily be smashed or just accidentally dropped. Yet in the ancient world it was also the best vessel to contain things of great value, things which were essential to a good life, olive oil, water and wine. These could be best looked after in a clay jar but it was not without risk.

So, I believe that Paul is telling us something profound about God's call to us, and something that reflects the life and ministry of James, Apostle and Martyr. God knows that we are fragile, he knows that we can be easily broken, he knows that we have our limitations and our failings, he knows that if we've lived at all we carry damage and hurt. Yet he still trusts us with the most precious gift of the Gospel of Christ so that we can preserve it and share it in as best we can. Paul is very aware of just how his own weakness contrasts with the extraordinary power of God. And when in chapter 12 of the same letter he complains about his thorn in the flesh the Lord gives him this amazing assurance 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'

For ourselves, for our church, for the great apostle James the same is true 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' It is not easy to hear because we want to live and minister from a position of strength and to be filled with

confidence and assurance. But when James spoke with self-confidence and assurance, he got it wrong. His confidence was in his own judgement and not in the power of God. But ultimately, he was given grace to know that in laying down his own life in martyrdom he would take it up again in resurrection.

We may not know a great deal about St James, but we do know that was faithful in spite of his failings and courageous in accepting the cup of suffering which was offered to him. He ran the race and received the prize that was beyond value and that is offered to us all through the grace of Jesus Christ crucified and risen.