

SAINT JAMES THE GREAT

Yesterday was the Feast of St James the Great, so called to distinguish him from the two other James's in the NT: James son of Alphaeus (James the Less) and James the brother of Jesus, who became the head of the Church in Jerusalem and who wrote the Letter of James. James the Great was one of the inner three disciples (together with his brother John and Peter), and was the first apostle to die for his faith. He was clearly a strong character – Jesus nicknamed him and John 'Boanerges', sons of thunder.

Legend has it that after the resurrection he preached the gospel in Spain, and that after his death his disciples placed his body in a rudderless boat that miraculously was guided to Galicia in northern Spain where he was buried. From the first century until the ninth his body laid there unnoticed, when a hermit was led by a star to a field where the relics, believed to be those of St James, were discovered. A shrine was built there which became the centre of a small local cult until the tenth century when kings and eminent bishops began to recognise the political and religious importance of the shrine of St James. It would be fair to say, in modern terms, that the shrine was effectively marketed, and by the twelfth century Santiago de Compostela had become the third most important Christian pilgrimage destination.

It is hard today to take the legend literally, and, indeed, not all medieval pilgrims believed it. Even so, the prayers and devotion of the faithful over the centuries have made Santiago a holy place. The first time I saw the city from Monte do Gozo I had the same sense of arrival as when I first saw Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. In normal times it would have seen a major festival over the last few days in honour of St James.

INVOCATION

+ In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

The Lord is enthroned on the prayers of his saints.

We lift up our hearts in thanks and praise:

Glory to you, O God!

PRAISE

Christ, whose glory fills the skies,
Christ, the true, the only Light,
Sun of Righteousness, arise,
triumph o'er the shades of night;
Dayspring from on high, be near;
Daystar, in my heart appear.

Dark and cheerless is the morn
unaccompanied by thee;
joyless is the day's return
'til thy mercy's beams I see;
'til they inward light impart,
glad my eyes, and warm my heart.

Visit, then, this soul of mine;
pierce the gloom of sin and grief;
fill me, Radiancy divine;
scatter all my unbelief;
more and more thyself display,
shining to the perfect day.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Almighty God,
to whom all hearts are open,
all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hidden:
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy name;
through Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE FEAST OF ST JAMES

As we come before God asking him to cleanse our hearts that we may worship and follow him in Spirit and in truth. In a time of silence reflect on your life in the last week, asking God to amend what is wrong, and to affirm what is good.

Then say:

You were sent to heal the contrite:
Father, have mercy.

You came to call sinners:
Christ, have mercy.

You plead for us at the right hand of the Father:
Lord, have mercy.

Almighty God have mercy upon me,
forgive me my sins,
and keep me in eternal life. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE DAY

Merciful God,
whose holy apostle Saint James,
leaving his father and all that he had,
was obedient to the call of your Son
and followed him even to death:
help us like him to follow his call without delay,
and to serve you in all that we do;
we make our prayer in Jesus' name. Amen.

READINGS

Read: Acts 11.27-12.2

Psalm 126

When the LORD brought back the exiles of Sion,
we thought we were dreaming.

Then was our mouth filled with laughter;
on our tongues, songs of joy.

Then the nations themselves said, "What great deeds
the LORD worked for them!"

What great deeds the LORD worked for us!
Indeed, we were glad.

Bring back our exiles, O LORD,
as streams in the south.
Those who are sowing in tears
will sing when they reap.

They go out, they go out, full of tears,
bearing seed for the sowing;
they come back, they come back with a song,
bearing their sheaves.

ALLELUIA

Alleluia, alleluia!
Praise be to you, O Christ,
enthroned on the praises of your saints.
Alleluia!

Read: MATTHEW 20.20-28

REFLECTION

A Letter from James

A letter had arrived from Jerusalem!

The scattered communities of the early Church didn't find it easy to keep in regular contact. Letters, and the messengers who brought them were their only links. The arrival of a letter always kindled excitement. What news did it bring of other Christians?

News of the letter passed quickly round the town and the elders began to gather. They went to the house of Thaddeus, one of the apostles who had fled from Jerusalem during the persecution which followed the martyrdom of Stephen. Linus was one of the first to arrive.

‘Lydia said you’ve had a letter. Who’s it from?’

‘It’s from James, the Lord’s brother. He’s now the leader of the brotherhood in Jerusalem.’

‘What does he say?’ asked Linus. His voice showed a touch of apprehension; he had struggled with some of the letters from Paul.

Thaddeus caught the feeling, ‘Oh! It’s OK. Very heartening and practical; lots of sensible advice.’

And so the elders gathered and the letter was read. It talked of the problems facing the early church; of riches and poverty, faith and works, patience and prayer. All agreed it brought great support. The elders discussed it briefly and then, in ones and twos, they went home. ‘A down-to-earth fellow, that James.’ One of them remarked as he took his leave.

After everyone had left, Thaddeus sat down to study the letter. He would have to speak about it next Sunday. But his thoughts drifted, and he found himself re-living those incredible days when they had been with Jesus in Galilee. What a mixed bunch the twelve had been! And those three closest to the Lord, Peter and John and John’s brother, the *other* James. Three hotheads! Especially James. What sort of letter would he have written?

Lydia, Thaddeus’ wife came in. ‘You look deep in thought,’ she said, ‘was the letter well received?’

‘Oh! Yes. Good practical stuff. It was mainly about how a local church ought to conduct itself – fellowship, prayer, healing, almsgiving. Actually, I was just thinking about that other James, you know, one of the inner three; one of the sons of Zebedee; strong-willed, impatient fellow. Do you remember what the Lord

called him – him and his brother John – Boanerges! Sons of Thunder!!’

‘Boanerges,’ repeated Lydia, savouring the flavour of the name. ‘Yes, I remember. James and John wanted to call down fire on those who wouldn’t welcome Jesus!’

Thaddeus remembered that alright. The other ten had had a good laugh at the brothers’ expense. He also remembered, more shame-facedly, that sometimes they had been a bit jealous of the three special companions. They went with Jesus when the rest had to stay away. He voiced his thoughts.

‘I wish we could have gone everywhere with the Lord like they did.’

‘Like the time when he brought Jairus’ daughter back to life,’ added Lydia. ‘Poor old Jairus. He could hardly believe it. It was so wonderful.’

‘Yes it was,’ said Thaddeus, ‘but you know for a long time they didn’t understand what it meant to be a *special* companion of the Lord.

‘By heaven, we were furious when James and John asked for the places of honour in the Kingdom – one on the right and the other on the left! The Lord put them in their place alright. “If you want to be first you must be the willing slave of all!” That’s what he told them!’ Thaddeus spoke with some feeling.

‘But that was a lesson we all had to learn.’ His wife gently reminded him.

Thaddeus fell silent again reliving those incredible days. John, it was thought, was still alive; some said he had gone to Ephesus where he founded a community. James, though, had been executed by Herod these fifteen years since, and this was a bitter memory. James was the first apostle to die for the Lord. At first impetuous like Peter, later he had shown true courage in standing up to Herod for the faith. The early church was built on the faith and courage of men like James.

Lydia broke the silence again: 'Jesus said something else that James really took to heart; something about a cup!'

Thaddeus had been thinking about that too. 'That's right,' he said, 'the Lord said his apostles would drink the cup which he drank. He also said that he came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

'At first we didn't understand Him. It seemed such a strange thing to say – like many of the things he told us. But then we didn't know what he was going to have to go through. After he had died and had risen, we remembered those strange words and realised that he'd been talking about what it would really mean to be one of his special companions. There would be no easy glory. The way was one of self-sacrifice.'

Lydia, too, remembered how vividly Jesus' sayings had come back to them, how they had burned in their hearts. Thaddeus continued:

'James had been one of the first to grasp that. He had been with the Lord on the mountain and in the garden. He had seen him transfigured, and in torment before he died. At first he'd been afraid, awestruck, like one who sees God face to face. He saw the glory and the agony of God as no other had done. Later he saw the connection and knew the truth deep in his heart: without the agony there was no true glory.'

Thaddeus stopped speaking. There was nothing more to say. James had witnessed to that truth in his own life. He drank the cup which the lord had drunk.

Pause and reflect.

RESPONSE

By all your saints still striving
For all your saints at rest,
Your holy name, O Jesus,

Forevermore be blest!
You rose, our King victorious,
That they might wear the crown
And ever shine in splendor
Reflected from your throne.

We praise you for the witness
of James, who lived and died
in witness to his Saviour,
Jesus the Crucified.

Lord, help us not to treasure
our worldly goods or fame,
but may we, trials enduring,
bring glory to your name.

Then let us praise the Father
And worship God the Son
And sing to God the Spirit,
Eternal Three in One,
Till all the ransomed number
Who stand before the throne,
Ascribe all power and glory
And praise to God alone.

PRAYERS

A time of free prayer and intercession. You might like to use this five-fold pattern:

For the Church
For pilgrims and all seeking spiritual renewal
For the world
For family, friends, neighbours and the local community
For the sick and all in need, near and far
For those who have died

At the end:

Merciful Father, accept my prayers,
for the sake of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

CONCLUSION

Our Father...

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
The love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all, now and for ever. Amen.