

Sermon Colwall 26th July 09 – St. James' Patronal festival

Acts 11:27-12:2, Matthew 20:20-28

Good morning. It's lovely to be here with you today, and very good for me to meet you all for the first time. I'm Beverly Watson, and am working as a curate in Aston and Nechells. I've heard quite a bit about **St. James'** Colwall, and I'd like to bring love and greetings to you from **St. James'** in Aston. It's good to be together today for our Patronal festival.

So St. James: he's the person in a sense who has brought us together today. So who was he, St. James? What sort of saint was he? Was he one of the great heroes of the faith, or was he really a rather flawed and fallen character? What might God want to say to us through him on this St. James' day.

Well St. James has gone down in history as St. James the Great. That's partly to distinguish him from the other disciple called James, who's sometimes known as St. James the Less. Clearly our St. James is St. James the Great, and maybe that's because Jesus so obviously valued him. The Gospels don't tell us very much about

James himself; what they tell us, time and time again, is that he was with Jesus. Not only that, he was with Jesus at the most important moments in Jesus' life. James, along with his brother John, was one of the first people Jesus called to follow him. He was with Jesus when Jairus' daughter was raised from the dead; he was there at the Transfiguration when Jesus spoke with Moses and Elijah. James was with Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane; he was there when Jesus appeared to the disciples after the resurrection. Jesus obviously valued James as a close and trusted disciple and friend. Our reading from Acts tells us that he also made the ultimate sacrifice – being put to death for his faith in Jesus. Maybe that's why he's sometimes referred to as St. James' the Great.

But our reading from the Bible today also reveals the fact that James was by no means perfect. Matthew tells us that James and John come to Jesus with their mother, and she asks whether they can sit one either side of Jesus in his kingdom; can they take the most honoured places and be Jesus' right hand and left hand men. Not surprisingly the other disciples are outraged. It's a clear request for power and prestige. Its a million miles away from Jesus'

mission, which was to serve and give his life as a ransom for many. And then later on, in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus asks Peter, James and John keep watch with him; and they fall asleep, failing Jesus in his hour of need. St. James', it would seem, was fairly flawed.

And I wonder how we feel about that? Are we disappointed that St. James was not perfect? Does it make you wish we had someone else for our patron saint – St. Luke, or St. Paul maybe? Or might we prefer some more up to date saint?

I don't know about you, but I was moved yesterday to hear of the death of Harry Patch. He was the last surviving British soldier to have served at the battle of Passchendale; and he died at the age of 111. In many ways he was a national hero, and embodied the sacrifice made by thousands of British troops who fought on the Western front in the First World War. He held strong Christian beliefs, on which he based his life; and these sustained him over the extraordinary length of his life.

Would he make a good patron saint maybe? Or is there something about St. James that holds real importance for us today?

Well I think what's interesting here about St. James is the way that Jesus responds to him when he fails. When James and John make their very worldly bid for power Jesus **says** something and he also **does** something.

What Jesus says to James and John is that greatness is not to be found in lording it over other people, but in being willing to be the servant of the very least person of all. He says, 'Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave' (Mt. 20:26-27). You'd have thought James would have known that already: he'd seen Jesus heal the sick, spend his time with tax collectors and sinners, feed the hungry, and prepare to give up his life for the world. But James clearly needed to be reminded of that again.

And maybe sometimes we're a bit like James in that way. We know that Jesus calls us to serve one another, to be willing to live lives of humility and self sacrifice rather like those WW1 heroes; but we sometimes forget. Perhaps,

like James, we drift into more worldly ways of thinking. That might be true if we find ourselves becoming more important at work, or in the community in some way; it's easy to lose sight of the need to be willing to serve. Or maybe we get tired of serving others, and perhaps feel we've done our bit; surely it's time for someone else to take over those mundane jobs. And then Jesus gently calls us back, and reminds us that he – even he – came not to serve, but to give his life for others. And I think it's fair to say that some of the most impressive people in our world – Mother Theresa say, William Wilberforce, Harry Patch maybe – have been people who've known what it is to serve.

So that's what Jesus **says** to James – he reminds him of his calling to be a servant of all. But what Jesus **does** is interesting too. You might think that Jesus would be less keen to have James as one of that inner circle of disciples; those special three who are with him at the really key moments of his life. Would Jesus still want James to be that close to him? And yet he does. Just a few days later, in the garden of Gethsemane, we read that Jesus took Peter, James and John with him, to keep watch with him

as he approached his death. And Jesus shared his deepest needs with them: he said, 'my soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.' (26:38). Jesus doesn't reject James, but looks to him in his hour of need.

And I think there's something deeply reassuring for us here today. None of us is perfect; neither of our churches is perfect, and yet Jesus still wants to be with us. He still wants to be present in our midst; he wants to teach us and guide us so that we can share his love and his life with those around us.

And it's not that our flaws and our failings don't matter; they do matter. The Lord, like a wise and loving parent, longs for his children to grow into mature, and wise and godly adults; to live lives that are holy, loving and good. He wants us to be transformed into the likeness of Jesus. And therefore we need his grace, and his forgiveness, his healing and his restoration. I love that hymn, 'Praise my soul the king of heaven, to his feet thy tribute bring; ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, who like thee his praise should sing'. Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven – that's what Jesus said to James – he said, 'the Son of

Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many'; that's what Jesus did for James – he forgave him, restored him and continued to love and value him. Our faults and failings matter, but Jesus can deal with them.

So you could say that James was flawed, but he wasn't fatally flawed; he wasn't beyond the love and grace and mercy of God. And maybe that's a message that we as 'St. James' churches' can hold onto and share with each other and our communities: no-one is fatally flawed, no-one is beyond the love and mercy of God; no-one is so far from God that he or she cannot be restored and healed and made new. Perhaps that's a special message that we can share with those around us.

But I think the most moving thing about St. James, which I think we can hold onto today, is simply that Jesus wanted James to be with him. Jesus wanted him as a close friend, a disciple, someone he could entrust himself to, someone who would share the most important events of his life and ministry. Maybe that's something that we can take away with us today, both as individuals and as churches: Jesus wants to be with us, he wants to share his life with

us. And he wants us too, to be his disciples; those who are willing to love and serve each other and our communities, so that the name of Jesus will be known.

So, are we proud to have James as our patron saint today? Are we happy to bear his name in our churches? I think I'm happy with that; and I pray that we will increasingly be those who, like James, Jesus delights to be with. Amen.