

Happy St. James Day. Today is our patronal festival, the feast of St. James. And I've come to the conclusion after a few years here that St. James is actually a very good saint to be named after. I think some are better than others. My last church was St. Peter's. That was a great one. I've got a friend coming and who'll be in church next week who was vicar of a church in London called St. Dionysius, which was dreadful because nobody had the faintest idea who St. Dionysius was, let alone how to spell it. In fact, I'm not even sure if St. Dionysius was male or female.

James is a good strong name. It's easy to spell, which is why whenever I go into Starbucks and they ask for your name, you know, to write on the cup, I always say James. Because nobody ever says, nobody queries it, they all know how to spell it. If I say Mark, I get a whole variety of things on the mug. So I just stick with James. More importantly than being easy to spell, St. James is an inspiring example to us. And it's important to note that churches are, I think, always to some extent at least, shaped by the saint after whom they are named.

And let's bear that in mind. As I tell you what we know about St. James. Jesus gave him and his brother John, the sons of Zebedee, the nickname Sons of Thunder, which might say something about their personalities. There's a story of them being told off after they suggested that they call down fire on a Samaritan village that hadn't welcomed Jesus appropriately. So it's fair to say that James has what we might delicately call now a robust personality. We might also guess that he was quite tall, as he's known as St. James the Greater, as opposed to St. James the Less, probably on the grounds of his stature. He was close to Jesus. He was part of the inner circle. He was one of only three disciples who Jesus took when he went up the mountain for the transfiguration. He might even have been the cousin of Jesus.

One thing we can be sure about is that he was the first apostle to be martyred. We're told in the Book of Acts, as we heard, that King Herod had him killed by the sword, which is why the color for today is red. And often if you're looking at symbolism of St. James, you'll see a sword on the doors on your way out. You'll notice that that sword is often depicted as part of his symbolism.

And St. James is associated with pilgrimage. There's a legend, which is rather farfetched to me, but that's not

for me to say. But there's a legend that his body got to Spain, northern Spain across the sea in a stone coffin and is now in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. And that cathedral's always been a place of pilgrimage. The Camino de Santiago is an extremely popular pilgrimage route, which I had fun doing on a bike a long time ago. And that's why St. James is often depicted, in fact always depicted, in pilgrims' gear, as in the stained glass window in the chapel. And as in the window, just up here, you'll see he always has a staff and a gourd. And the gourd is for water for pilgrims on the route. And he often always has a shell. And the shell, is a scallop, is what they would give the pilgrims as they completed the pilgrimage routes. So the shell is also a sign and a symbol for St. James, again, as depicted heavily on the door and elsewhere, as you'll see on your way out. And that is just about all that we know about St. James.

So let me turn to look at the passage in the gospel in more detail. And I want to split it into three sections. And it begins with a mother's request. The mother of James and John comes to Jesus with a question. "Can my boys sit either side of you in your kingdom?" We can't be sure if the brothers put their mother up to this or whether she decided to do it herself. My hunch is it was the latter because mothers, in my experience, always have a clear sense of what is best for their sons. James's mother, for whatever reason, asks a question that's completely inappropriate.

And what makes it even more jarring is the context. So just before our reading starts, the verse before, Jesus says, "I am going to be handed over, mocked, flogged, and crucified before I'm raised on the third day." Then straight after that, the boy's mother wades in. "Yeah. Anyway, can my boys get the best seats in your kingdom?" It's a completely tone deaf question. It's jarring. Inappropriate. It's the wrong question, at the wrong time. Jesus was talking about the cross. James's mother is more interested in crowns.

But I just want to mention Jesus's response to this ridiculous question. There's a kindness, a gentleness, an understanding about Jesus's response. He doesn't say, "Just don't be ridiculous." Or he doesn't get angry as the disciples do. He calmly explains to them that he wasn't in a position to answer their request.

The response from Jesus contrasts with the reaction from the disciples. It says when the ten heard it, they

were angry with the two brothers. Interesting that they were annoyed with the brothers and not the mother. It's not clear exactly why they were annoyed, but we can speculate. Maybe they thought that James and John had stolen a march on them, that they wished they'd asked that question. We do know that they carried on amongst themselves, the disciples, squabbling about this issue. And at the last supper, the night before Jesus died, Luke tells us that a dispute arose amongst them as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest.

I was interested to be pondering this story this week, when back home in England, a new prime minister was forming a new cabinet. And all the politicians were jostling for the top jobs and they were saying, "Oh, I didn't really mean it when I said I wanted to stay in the European Union. I'm really a Brexiteer." And they were all jostling to try and get the best jobs in the cabinet. The same phenomenon, a group of people trying to work out the pecking order to see who should be top dog. I'd say, it's quite reassuring in some ways to know that human nature never changes, that what the disciples were doing all those years ago, it's what we're still doing today.

So James and the other disciples got distracted. And they missed the point completely about what Jesus was teaching them. They just didn't get what Jesus was saying. Jesus had to say it over and over again to get through to them. It wasn't that he told them once and they understood what he was talking about. Over time, over and over again, Jesus gives the same message and slowly it sinks in with them. A sculptor once carved a magnificent stone lion and someone said to the sculptor, "How do you do that?" He said, "Well, it's not that difficult. Really. I just chip away all the bits that don't look like a lion." And that's how Jesus molded James and the other disciples. And that's how Jesus continues to work with his followers by his Holy Spirit. If we're open to him working with us slowly over time, then slowly we'll find that we come to be more like him. He'll chip away the bits that don't look like him.

So we've seen the mother's question, the disciples reaction. Thirdly, we get to Jesus's teaching. After he heard the disciples squabbling amongst themselves, Jesus sits down with them and explains to them what life is like in his upside down kingdom. He says, "You know, out in the world the rulers love to rule over their subjects. The greatest ones are the tyrants. But in the Kingdom of Heaven, my kingdom, the kingdom I'm

talking about, the kingdom I came to bring, if you want to be great, you must be a servant. Whoever wants to be the first or the greatest among you must be your slave." In other words, he's saying, "I didn't call you to be a sensation, but a servant."

And this wasn't just what Jesus taught. It's how he lived. St. Paul writes this about him in the book of Philippians, "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interest of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

Of course, perhaps the greatest example that we have of this way of life that Jesus followed was when he washed the disciples feet at the Last Supper. When they were arguing again amongst themselves as to who was the greatest, Jesus took about a bowl and a towel and did for them something that a slave would normally do. And see how our passage ends. "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."

We are all called to greatness in the Kingdom of God, which means that we're to serve one another as we together walk the way of the Cross. Which takes us back to the question with which I started, about what it means for us to be identified with St. James. I think it means that we should understand ourselves as people walking together, walking together the way of the Cross. We're a pilgrim people. We're travelers, and together we're exploring God's upside down kingdom, where the first are last and the last are first. And where the greatest must be a servant.

There's something in that which I think is a way of how we should understand ourselves. A blind man, according to Aesop, in one of his fables, a blind man and a lame man happened to come at the same time to a piece of very bad road. The former begged the latter to guide him through his difficulties. "How can I do that?" Said the lame man, "As I am scarcely able to drag myself alone. But if you were to carry me, I can warn you about anything in the way. My eyes will be your eyes and your feet will be my feet." "With all my heart," replied the blind man, "Let us serve one another." So, taking his

lame companion on his back, they traveled in this way with safety and pleasure.

That's an image of people traveling together, bearing one another's weaknesses, walking together on the same road. St. James was a big man with a strong but flawed personality who inspired a pilgrim people. And I pray that this example will continue to shape us and our community. May we come to see ourselves as a band of pilgrims, each with our own strengths and weaknesses, supporting and serving one another as we seek to head together in the direction of God's kingdom.

Amen.