

Readings: Jeremiah 26:1-15, Mark 1:14-20

Most non-Covid summers, my family and I spend some time in Sorrento in southern Italy. For the past fifteen or so years, one of the regular features of our July holidays has been the dramatic fireworks set off along the Amalfi coast in honour of the Feast of St James on 25<sup>th</sup> July.

Much of what is written in the Bible about Jesus' first twelve disciples, who (apart from Judas, of course) became the apostles of the Early Church, is extremely sketchy. For the most part we know almost nothing about them as individuals: their backgrounds, families or even their emotions, except details attributed to the group of disciples as a whole.

But while Peter and John are seen as Jesus' special friends - we do also receive a surprising amount of detail about St James-the-Great - as opposed to St James-the-Less, who appears further down the lists of Jesus' disciples, is celebrated in May with the apostle St Philip, and of whom even less is revealed in the pages of Scripture than the James we remember today.

We first encounter James and his brother John, working on a fishing vessel on Lake Galilee as they prepare their nets for their next catch of fish.

We know that they worked as fishermen with their father and we are given his name, Zebedee. Zebedee's family are well enough off to be able to afford hired workers to work alongside them, which also suggests their boat was of sufficient size to allow for a sizeable group of fishermen.

In our reading, we heard how Jesus, having called Simon Peter and Andrew to follow him, then also extended the same offer to James and John, who were likewise to turn their hands to becoming fishers of men. So inspired and excited were they by this call, that they left everything – the boats and nets and employees representing their livelihood, and even their father – in order to follow Jesus, to learn more about who he was and what he was doing, and to share in his mission from God.

These young men were clearly enthusiastic and even impetuous. Jesus gave them the nickname, "Boanerges", translated as the "Sons of Thunder". We can only speculate on why this might have been, their temperament, their fiery preaching or their activism, perhaps?

When a Samaritan village refused to welcome Jesus, James and John asked him, *Lord, wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them, even as Elias did? But he turned, and rebuked them.*

The Gospel of St Matthew suggests that James and John were also driven on by what today might be called a "pushy mother". She appears to have been a follower of Jesus herself, and to the indignation of the other disciples, asked Jesus: *Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on the left, in thy kingdom.* Jesus replies that the places of honour are not his to give, but they will go to those for whom they have been prepared by his heavenly Father.

He also reminds the disciples that their calling is to share in the cup which he will drink (the same metaphor he uses when he asks God to “take away this cup” the night before his Crucifixion), and that those who will be great should act as servants and ministers to others.

Yet despite these rebukes for their over-exuberance, James and John, together with Peter, remain the trusted three who accompany Jesus on the most significant moments of his journey.

Only they are allowed into the bedroom as he raises Jairus’ daughter from the dead; it is these three who ascend the Mount of the Transfiguration with him and experience the vision of his heavenly glory and the appearance of Moses and Elijah. He also asks them in Gethsemane to come aside with him as he experiences his agony in the face of death, but they fail to support him, falling asleep as he wrestles in prayer.

Clearly, there was something special for Jesus about these three disciples, and this translated into a sense of leadership after the Early Church began at Pentecost.

However, perhaps unsurprisingly, it seems that James was not subtle or cautious in his teaching of the Gospel, no doubt delivering his message with characteristic spontaneous passion. When King Herod feels threatened by the Resurrection followers of Jesus, as recorded in the Book of Acts, it is James who draws his attention:

*Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword.*

It is good to recap the details of those saints’ lives of whom we have heard, but may feel somewhat hazy. St James the Great is not a particularly well-known saint in this country – St James’s Palace and the Court of St James are in fact dedicated to the other St James – James the Less.

James the Great is, however, the patron saint of Spain (the Spanish for James being Iago), and gives his name to that greatest of pilgrimage destinations, Santiago de Compostela.

The cockleshell traditionally worn by medieval pilgrims is in France known as the Coquille St Jacques, and the hundreds of thousands who have found or deepened their faith on the journey to Santiago may give thanks for the existence or the intercession of St James the Great.

The lives and stories of the saints and the apostles exist to offer us the example of their courage and faith, even to the point of martyrdom, but they also, as we can see in St James the Great, reflect that Christ chooses us regardless of flaws or connections.

We may recognise the impetuosity and outspokenness of St James in ourselves or in those we love, but we see also how Christ moulds us to make our personalities speak for him.

Remembering St James today, we ask God to mould us, too, into followers who do not look back, who walk with Jesus even in the hardest times, and who are bold and unashamed in sharing our faith with others. Amen.