

Sermon for Eucharist – feast of St James. July 25th 2021
St Mary Abbots Church, Kensington

Readings:

Jeremiah 45:1-5

Acts 11.27-12.2

Matthew 20.20-28

A few months ago I found myself swept up rather unexpectedly in the protests against the Israeli military action in Palestine. Given that I both knew how volatile the political situation was, and indeed that I knew that the location of the Israeli embassy was just round the corner, you might think it rather naïve of me to have not anticipated what happened. But effectively me and the children got trapped in Kensington Gardens – there were so many protesters swarming down both Kensington High Street and Kensington Church Street that the police very wisely locked the park entrances and asked people to make their way to alternative exits along Bayswater Road. When I realised this was the situation I asked if it were at all possible simply to be let through the locked gates and asked the short journey back to our flat so that the children were safe, and a very compassionate police officer kindly escorted us through several locked gates to Kensington Church Street, where we were faced with a river of people. In fact in order to cross from York Place to Holland Street we had to walk uphill, join the crowds, and edge our way across in the flow in an attempt to get out where we needed to be. I had forgotten the power of a crowd of people. I had forgotten both the excitement and the fear of being swept up in something where strong feelings are being expressed.

Thinking about it, James, as he appears in our Gospel passage, is a bit like me and my children, somehow being swept up in something that we didn't quite mean to be swept up in. In fact James, despite being the object of the discussion, doesn't even get mentioned by name, let alone say anything in the discussion. The main characters are his mother, who again is sadly nameless, Jesus, and the other 10 disciples. It seems somehow a strange passage to choose as we celebrate this Feast of St James. James is simply pressed forwards into a debate he hasn't initiated, and becomes the scapegoat of the other disciples' anger. It is frustrating not to get the insight that we get in Mark's account of this discussion, where Mark omits the character of the Mother, and instead has James and John themselves making the request to Jesus to sit on his either side in the kingdom. In Matthew we don't even know if this is a desire shared by James and John, just that it is their Mother's wish. It is hard, by Matthew's account, to come to any other conclusion than that James simply got swept up in this discussion – a case of wrong place, wrong time.

Likewise in the brief mention of James in the Acts of the Apostles, we have frustratingly little detail of the motive for Herod's killing of James. Acts is full of juxtapositions just as we have here – the radical hospitality and generosity of the apostles seeking to bless those who have suffered as a result of the famine, and then the atrocious persecution and martyrdoms. Other sources tell us that James and his brother had earned the nickname 'Sons of thunder' because of their fiery passion and temper, and so perhaps Herod had become aware of this and singled James out from the other apostles to kill and therefore silence. We simply don't and can't know. So do we have to conclude, again, that James was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time? That somehow he was passively swept up in something that, due to rumour of his personality, resulted in his death? Again, wrong place, wrong time?

I feel uneasy coming to this conclusion, despite the scant amount of biblical material to draw upon. It must be more than just wrong place wrong time, more than simply being swept up in something

by mistake. Surely we must remember and celebrate James today because of his deliberate intention. His choice. His action. His faith?

Because we mustn't forget the rest of the story. James is called by Jesus, and James respond to Jesus – leaving his father and their nets. James as there at the transfiguration – his faithfulness allowing him the closest access and insight into Jesus's relationship with the Father. Indeed, regardless of Matthew's silence about whether or not it was also the request of James as well as his mother to be seated at the side of Jesus on high, this story enables the most important of teachings about discipleship. We may long for the simplicity of the assurance of being with Jesus for all eternity, but Jesus tells us that we first need to reassess our understanding of greatness and hierarchy. Our faith and our confidence in Christ must not inflate our egos such that we lord it over others – instead, just as Jesus did, we are called first and foremost to serve.

James may well get swept up in things, and yet each and every day he made a decision to continue to follow Jesus, a decision which brought him fellowship, insight, understanding, and also fear, persecution and ultimately martyrdom. Being a follower of Jesus in the early church was not something that could be done lightly. It was not possible to be a passive disciple. The politics of church were not simply something to get mildly flustered about, they were a matter of life and death. And so James, feint though his is in the narrative of scripture, has to be seen as much more than someone passive, caught up in the wrong place at the wrong time. It is such a joy to sing 'For all the Saints' together, and there is much that speaks to me in that hymn as I mentally fill in the gaps and imagine the life of Saint James. But I look forward in due course to singing 'Jesus I have promise to serve thee to the end', because for me what we celebrate on Feast Days is the faithful endurance of those who have gone before us. Those like James, who didn't just respond once to Jesus, but chose each and every day to be faithful, and to be prepared to wear the martyrs crown. Those who are able to humbly hear and respond to the call to be the servant Christ has called them to be.

We will always get swept up in things. Debates will always rage – in and out side of the church. But the encouragement on this Feast of St James is to choose to follow Christ, each and every day. To not be passive, to not be judgemental. To be prepared to be challenged, to understand where we have got it wrong. And to live out our faith joyfully, until the very end.

Amen.