

St James the Apostle – 25th July 2021–
Acts 11:27-12:2, 2 Corinthians 4:7-15; Matthew 20:20 -28

James, the brother of John and probably the cousin of Jesus was the first of the Apostles to be martyred. This happened in AD44 on the orders of Herod Agrippa 1, whose sister was Herodias (the one who had John the Baptist beheaded) and Agrippa was the grandson of Herod the Great. This was about 11 years after Jesus had been killed. Christianity was alive and flourishing and there were many people in positions of authority who did not like that. Agrippa knew that by curbing the activities of the early Christian church he was pleasing the Jews.

In our gospel we read about James and John's mother asking Jesus a favour. This event can be seen in many different ways. One way to see it is through the great trust and belief that their Mother had in Jesus. She had a faith which believed that Jesus would be King of his own kingdom. She did not doubt, and she wanted her sons to be there beside Jesus. They were worthy people; they were followers of Christ. We know that because one died for his faith, the other lived to a ripe old age, but also endured exile for the sake of the Gospel. They knew by the nature of what they had learnt about discipleship that what had, and would happen to Jesus, could happen to them. "We are able" - "And he said unto them, "Ye shall drink indeed of my cup and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with".

The other disciples were understandably indignant when they heard the request. But this gives Jesus the opportunity to give these few words about who will be greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. In our secular world we are used to powerful men and women getting their own way. But Jesus says that is not the way for Christians. Our attitude should be one of service. First of all, obeying the will of our Master. Doing what He wants. That is the bit that we probably all find the hardest – knowing what God's will is for our lives. We have so many options open to us. If I am sure that God is speaking to me, then I have no problem in acting. The difficulty I have is when I think that I have heard God's voice and then I begin to think of all kinds of excuses why it is not really God speaking to me, it is just my overactive imagination. It is like stepping out onto the water as Peter did, trusting and seeing that God is there and will not let us down. Getting used to the way in which he speaks to me. Yours and my attitude towards others should be wanting the best for them. Putting others needs before our own. Jesus gave us an example to follow. James followed that example.

James knew that what he had to do was to lead the Christians and enable them and him to proclaim the Good News of the coming of the Kingdom of God. James's life was taken from him as the powerful men of the world tried to stop the spreading of the Good News.

John however, lived to an old age. God does not call everyone to give their life as James did. We do not always understand why one person dies for their faith and another does not. It is not helpful to ask "What would I do if I had to die for my faith? Would I do it?" The important thing is to be doing what God want you to do. John lived a long life. It was not all easy. He was imprisoned, exiled, and had to learn to live his Christian life on a daily basis, growing in the love and knowledge of the Lord. For some of us, serving God and others, needs hard work and constant discipline as we struggle to understand where God is leading us. That is a paradox of our Christian faith. So easy and yet so difficult. The Mother of James and John was not frightened to ask Jesus for something that she felt was important. She did not get the answer she expected, but it was an answer that helped her sons to grow stronger in their commitment to follow Jesus, whatever might befall them. We can follow her example – take whatever is in your heart and mind to God and expect an answer!

James had his cup of an early death to bear, John had his cup to bear of a along life with much to do in it and much to suffer. Whichever way God wants to lead us, let us be faithful, minister to others and serve them as Christ serves us.

Before Paul, in 2 Corinthians 4, talks about being hard pressed, he is talking about the treasure that we have in jars of clay. I know that clay can be made into beautiful pots, but before it has been molded into a shape and baked it is cold, damp, and grey. Once baked it becomes hard and is easily broken. But it can be made to look so beautiful, if it is the hands of a master craftsman. It is not the only time in the bible when we are likened to a jar of clay. It is amazing that as we are likened to a jar of clay, we learn that inside those pots there is treasure. Those who are followers of Jesus, have treasure within them.

The treasure that Paul had in his jar of clay was God's power. The power that enabled him to face all the difficulties, sufferings, misunderstandings, rejections and doubts that he experienced. As well as facing these pressures he was able to come out rejoicing and knowing that he had not been destroyed. People around can see that Jesus Christ is Lord because of the way in which Paul responds to the difficulties he faces.

And as we go about our daily task, let us look for God's power working in other's lives. Let us not contribute to the difficulties they have to bear, or to cause those difficulties, but let us rejoice that we have that treasure in jars of clay – that we are being molded for the glory of God by his all-surpassing power. Jesus' followers will not be free from being hard pressed, perplexed, persecuted, struck down, but all those who follow Jesus can say BUT NOT crushed, despairing, abandoned, or destroyed. We have God's treasure, something exciting, wonderful, to be searched for, and it is through that treasure within us, that God will show his power in our lives.