

St James' Church, Weybridge

St James' Patronal Festival 2024 – Sunday 28th July 2024

Matt. 20: 20-28 / Acts 11: 27-12.2

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Well Good Morning everyone, it is good to see you all, and it's particularly good, a particular honour to be preaching for the first time in this Church this morning, not only as your curate, but also on this our name day – our Patronal Festival. This is my fourth Sunday with you all, and I do want to start by saying how welcomed I have felt in this community, how amazingly you've embraced me and encouraged me as I've moved to Weybridge, to a brand new area, and begun a new form of ministry here in this place. Thank you.

Over these last few weeks, getting to know how life works at St James, some words have been floating around my head, words I actually heard first in Guildford Cathedral on the morning that I was ordained. Bishop Andrew opened the service, he turned to the congregation and said this – 'deacons are ordained so that the people of God may be better equipped to make Christ known. Theirs is a life of visible service.' Theirs is a life of visible service. Now perhaps one reason why these words have stayed with me these past few weeks is because, to be very honest with you, I don't tend to enjoy serving other people very often. I can find serving others very tiresome, stressful – it feels like it takes more than its gives – and what do I get back in reward? Often I just want to look out for me, for my needs, for my wants – put my feet up on my brand new IKEA sofa and forget those around me - visible service – me first, service second.

You see, to serve others challenges the whole business of vying for power, for status, for authority, that many of us can in some shape or form fall prey to. We often like to be in the know, to be looked up to, to have influence, respect, prominence – to willingly serve other people is to let go of something of our own importance in order to raise up the dignity of others. It balances the scales, it levels the playing field, it can often show us, uncomfortably perhaps, that we are probably just like everybody else – all of us vulnerable, complex, in need.

Interestingly, it is to this sort of temptation that Jesus in Matthew's Gospel is challenging his disciples – in particular James, our James, and John – who seem to misunderstand that to follow Christ is not to share in prestige, or in power, but to share in service and in sacrifice. Their mum approaches Jesus with a bright idea – Jesus: in your kingdom, I want my sons to be in the place of honour – to be at your left and your right, higher than everybody else. We're told the other disciples are angry with such a request – and not, I think, because they are so pure minded to think such proud thoughts themselves – no - they're probably angry because James and John got their desires across first. In God's kingdom, they all want pride of place, to be celebrated, to be great – it wasn't that long ago on top of mountain that Jesus said to them - 'blessed are those who are meek, for they will inherit the earth' - but they seem to have forgotten this point.

And so it falls on Jesus, once again, to remind them firstly that greatness is not measured by the size of their superiority, but by the size of their service – 'whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave.'

You know the Greek word for 'servant' here – diakonos - is where we get the word 'deacon' from – 'whoever wishes to be great among you must be your deacon' in other words – we're all called to be deacon-like to one another – called to make our faith visible in how we serve. Secondly, Jesus reminds them that such service is essentially a mirror of his own loving and sacrificial ministry. He goes on - 'as the son of Man came not to be served but to serve, he gave his life as a ransom for many.' Sitting behind Jesus' words at this point is an earlier passage from the prophet Isaiah, Isaiah chapter 53 – 'the righteous one, the king, my servant, shall bear their iniquities...he pours out himself to death, and he bears the sins of many.' We all know how Jesus ends up giving his life as a 'ransom for many' – his kingly service was to die in our place and for our salvation. The real sign of Christ's kingdom then is not the glorious throne accompanied by James and John as they would like to imagine it here – the true sign of Christ's kingdom is Jesus hanging on a criminal's cross. Jesus served us in the most brutal way imaginable, a way of sacrifice, a testament of his unconditional love for the world. This is how true service, how true greatness is being portrayed. Service is to literally spend ourselves willingly for others – at a cost, yes, sometimes – as a reflection of Christ's love, yes, always. Visible service – others first, me second.

It does seem like, despite James and John's earlier boastful and misguided thinking, they do learn and end up inhabiting some of Jesus' teaching here. The reading read out earlier from Acts describes the disciples, in response to the prophesy of a soon to come famine, dividing their resources – most likely their food, clothes, money – in order to support one another and one another's needs. They gave up something of what they had to support someone who had less of it – it's not too dissimilar to us and others, at St James, giving food in order for it to be given to those who need it in our weekly foodbank. It's not too dissimilar from the many many ways all the teams and groups in this place spend their time and resources to help others, to keep this church a place that is open and welcoming and inclusive to the people of Weybridge and beyond. It's not too dissimilar to the ways you have welcomed and served me as I arrived as a curate in this place – made to feel like part of your family, provided for, and encouraged along the way.

The apostle James is, awfully and brutally murdered – becoming, we think, the first of the apostles to be martyred. His own manner of death and sacrifice is not necessarily a call for us to follow suit – but it is interesting, remarkable even, across these two passages, to plot the change that James goes through. He initially seeks the place of power, of prestige, of status – to lust after ways that make him appear better than those around him. But through his continual encounters with Christ, and his ongoing faith in him, he learns that true discipleship is found in how we serve our fellow brother and sister. How we love one another, and show something, a glimpse, of God's unending love for the world.

I know I find serving others difficult and tiring and stressful – I will keep being reminded of those words Bishop Andrew spoke to me and many others a few Sundays ago. But in what we've all heard read this morning, I think it is an encouragement, an instruction, once again, that as Christians, as Christ's body, service is at the heart of what we do, and it is how we show our faith in Christ to one another. Let our service be what we are known for, with the example of Saint James, and always, always, in the name of Christ. *Amen.*

The Revd Tom Musson, July 2024.