

St James' Church, Weybridge

James the Apostle – 25th July 2025

Introduction and Call to Worship

We come to worship God in the company of James and all the saints, and to offer God our hearts and minds in service of the kingdom. James, son of son of Zebedee is described as one of the first disciples to join Jesus. The Synoptic Gospels state that James and John were with their father by the seashore when Jesus called them to follow him. (Matt. 4:21-22, Mk. 1:19-20) According to the Gospel of Mark, James and John were called the "Sons of Thunder" and also the "Sainly Brothers of Martyrdom". (Mark 3:17) James was one of only three apostles whom Jesus selected to bear witness to his Transfiguration. The Acts of the Apostles records that Agrippa I had James executed by sword, hence the use of Red Vestments and hangings in Church today, for a Martyr of the Church.

Today's Readings

First Reading Acts 11:27 – 12:2

The early Christians face a time of famine and of violent persecution, which results in the death of James.

Gospel Matthew 20:20-28

A request for the best places in the kingdom gives Jesus a chance to teach about his own concept of greatness.

HOMILY

"It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave." (Matthew 20:26-27)

Do you remember that fateful question when you were a child, usually by an elderly and well-meaning family member, "What are you going to be when you grow up?" Can you recall how you answered that, or a similar question? For some, even at a young age, a sense of vocation can be fostered in those conversations, a seed may be sown.

Today we celebrate and remember St James, our patron, who was called by Jesus to leave his life as a fisherman and follow him as a disciple, using his gifts and talents for the building of God's kingdom. Curiously, the Gospel set for today doesn't mention James – yet the equivalent reading found in the Gospel according to Mark, (10:35-45) re-tells this moment rather differently, with two brothers, James and John wanting something from Jesus.

Perhaps they had always thought they would like power, or political leadership, rather than working in the family business. "Teacher" They ask, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." Bold isn't it! Yes! But Matthew says that it was their mother who thinks her sons deserve better. Have you ever met a parent like that? I know a few teachers who have!

Interestingly, today's Gospel account doesn't tell us exactly whose initiative this was: whether it was the mother, dragging her reluctant and embarrassed sons along with her, or whether it was the ambitious sons, pushing their mother forward to do the dirty work for them. Certainly, the young men are there,

and are quick to back their mother up, when Jesus asks if they really want what they are asking for. Given Mark's pithier Gospel places the two brothers front and centre, I would probably think they were actually behind the request – but truth be told, we can't be sure.

Today's Gospel neatly sums up one aspect of human desire – to be in charge. In leadership there are always those who feel overlooked and others who desire more power, control and authority. But with power comes consequences, many unforeseen, as leadership is often different to the dream, as our present government, in stark terms, have found out this first year since their landslide victory.

James and John must have quickly realised that our Lord's plan was not at all what they had been expecting. Jesus is not about earthly power or control at all, he is not preoccupied with judging, but kingdom values of love, joy and peace. He desires to make a real difference to the lives of all people, and our Lord speaks about the cup that they must share with him – a Jewish reference to suffering, as in the Passover meal, or even from the prophet Jeremiah (25:15) the cup is symbolic of the wrath of God

“For thus the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it.” Foreboding stuff!

Who would want a leadership role now – complete with a cup of wrath? If James and John knew their Hebrew scriptures well, they may have realised our Lord's words, and the meaning behind his use of 'cup' with its bitter/sweet nature in Jewish tradition.

Jesus says that his disciples must be servants and slaves, not rulers, and they must be ready to suffer for the sake of the Gospel. After our Lord's death and resurrection, the disciples, including James, were strengthened by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and emboldened to live kingdom lives. That was and is still deeply compelling. Their inclusive ability to speak languages after Pentecost is a marker of the dynamic call of discipleship that is for all people.

When James and John, or their much-maligned Mother asked for recognition and power, they could have hardly imagined that very request would be answered with power from on high, and the strength and determination to work faithfully for God's Kingdom, even in the face of tremendous challenge, and in time they would suffer like Jesus their teacher. They defied the religious authorities of their day and preached, taught and healed fearlessly.

James would live long enough to experience the reality of his call to leadership, and the suffering cup, as he was killed by the sword in AD 44. His martyrdom is recorded in our first reading from Acts 12: 1-2. There is a later tradition, from around the 7th century, that James preached the Gospel in Spain before his martyrdom.

Tradition suggests that some of his remains were brought back to Galicia and a church erected above them. This was the beginnings of the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela and the tomb of St. James as we know it today, a place where many pilgrims find healing and renewal of faith.

As disciples we are surely thankful that not all of us are called to be revolutionaries; God willing, we won't be martyrs, but we are all called to the service of God, which is perfect freedom.

That call looks different for different people. There may well be people among us today, or online, who are waiting to discern God's call upon their heart to service, perhaps even a vocation to ordained ministry – but whatever our vocation, as disciples we are called to commit to a lifelong pilgrimage of faith, discovery and self-denial. As we walk the path of faith, equipped for our travels with the spirit of truth and liberation, nothing earthly can enslave us.

So, open your heart anew to the call of Christ upon your life. Remember God will and does use our gifts and talents today for the building-up of the kingdom – we each have a part to play as we follow the faithful example of James. Be willing to examine your heart again.

What is Jesus calling us to do as a family of faith, as we walk in his footsteps the pilgrimage of life, and strive to build up God's revolutionary kingdom here in Weybridge?

And what is Jesus calling you to do? How is God calling you to serve? Amen.

Father Damian Harrison-Miles, July 2025.