

The Wymersley Benefice of Cogenhoe and Great Houghton
and Little Houghton with Brafield on the Green

Sermon 25th July 2021, Third Sunday after Trinity

James the Apostle

Today we remember James who was the first Apostle martyred for his faith in the year 44.

Galilean fishermen James and John, were the first apostles called by Jesus to “Come, follow him.” Our Explore the Book bible studies on Zoom, bring the bible stories of alive in ways that just don’t happen from hearing the readings once a week in church and I invite anyone with access to a computer to join us. At present our focus is on the Acts of the Apostles, written by Luke.

James, John, and Peter formed the inner circle of disciples who enjoyed preferential treatment from Jesus enabling them to witness his transfiguration on the mountain, the raising of Jairus’ daughter and the agony in the garden, they were ordinary human beings doing extraordinary things. They held positions of privilege within the group of disciples and as we know, people who receive preferential treatment can sometimes let that privilege go to their heads; this appears to be the case with the mother of James and John.

We all bask in reflected glory from time to time, in the achievements of a friend or relative. How often have you listened to stories about the accomplishments of someone’s children or grandchildren, or told similar tales of your own? We all do it! The more successful our loved ones are, the more success we want for them and that is what happens in our Gospel. This particular mother loved her sons and was proud of them, fair enough, yet despite their success, she wanted more. So she approached Jesus with a daring request. Simply that they sit with him in a position of authority in his Kingdom, one on the left and one on the right. Talk about pushy parent!

But was she wrong? Surely, she was just looking out for her sons, she knew what they had given up to follow Jesus. They had been loyal and faithful and, in her eyes, they deserved recognition. They were ambitious and perhaps they could imagine themselves sitting in a place of power next to the leader of this great new kingdom. Perhaps they had talked about this together and decided that Jesus might be more receptive to the request if it came from their mother, not themselves.

Whatever the case they were wrong!

This story, recorded in the Gospels of both Matthew and Mark, occurs near the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry, just a few days before the crucifixion. Jesus and the disciples were approaching Jerusalem, time was running out, Jesus was about to be crucified and would be gone. His disciples know this and they are anxious to sort out the hierarchy of their group, James, John and Peter thought they’d get their request in first by claiming the best seats next to Jesus in his new Kingdom; it’s a power struggle in the making.

The trouble was, even at this late stage in Jesus’ ministry, the disciples had still not fully grasped that his kingdom was not an earthly one ruled by those with power, to be won or lost in battle; it was to be a kingdom where people cared for and served each other equally. That’s not to say Jesus didn’t want leaders, or people to take responsibility over others, or for their own actions, but that he wanted leaders who were not seeking prominence for themselves.

Leadership is a funny old thing. There are too many organisations, churches included, where authority is seen as power. Where people think they have made it to the top and can run rough-shod over others and follow their own agenda. In all areas, good leadership should not equate to self-glory, power, or position. Rather it requires hard work and humility and the willingness to serve others, putting their needs before

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your own.

It means following Jesus and living as Jesus did.

Jesus tells the brothers that their request is not his to give, that authority belongs to his Father in heaven and he also asks if they can drink of the cup he will be drink. This cup speaks of sacrifice and suffering. Suffering that may lead to death for their love of God. We know that in the end, that is what happened to James and John.

They went on to serve Jesus faithfully and willingly for many years at great cost to themselves. James has the distinction of being the first apostle to die, as we heard in our reading from Acts, he was killed by the sword, beheaded at the hands of Herod Agrippa, who thought that by ridding the world of Christian leaders, he could stem the flow of those hearing the good news and becoming followers of Jesus themselves. The manner of his execution indicates that James was accused of leading the people to follow false gods; nothing could have been further from the truth.

John was the last apostle to die after living in exile on the island of Patmos.

These two brothers, who desired seats of prominence on either side of Jesus in his kingdom, are remembered, not just for their ambition or want of power, or even the pushiness of their mother. They are remembered for their love of Jesus, their work in continually spreading the word of the Gospel, and their bravery and faithfulness to God to the very end of their lives.

The manner of their deaths as the first and last apostles recorded in the scriptures to be martyred for their faith, show us that they were indeed willing to drink from the cup that Jesus drank.

Whatever our roles in life, I wonder how many of us could do the same?

Amen

Reverend Irene