

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 8th Sunday after Trinity

St James the Apostle - 25th July 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

It's not often that the feast of St James falls on a Sunday. When it does, in the great cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain, built above the place where it is said the Apostle was buried, they declare an *ano santo*, a holy year. In those years the great west door of the cathedral, known as the 'door of forgiveness', is opened as pilgrims enter through it in celebration, often having walked hundreds of kilometres to reach their goal. At the top of your service sheets, you have a picture of the statue of St James which stands above the 'door of forgiveness'. On his face is a look of welcome, reconciliation and joy.

It's interesting how people have rediscovered pilgrimage in modern times. Following the Camino, the Way of St James, was a popular medieval pursuit, but somehow it has also captivated the postmodern, sceptical mind. All sorts of people walk it for all sorts of reasons. I was with an ecumenical colleague in Marseille this week who was setting off to walk a section of the Camino, as he does every summer. He told me of a pilgrim he had encountered last year. When my friend asked him why he was walking the way, the pilgrim replied: 'I don't know. I'm hoping that by the end I will know.' Anyone who has spent time pondering the meaning of life might say the same.

Thanks to the insights into human longing of the custodians of Santiago de Compostela, pilgrimage is one of the things for which we remember St James the Apostle. Why else do we keep his feast? The Gospel passage that is read each year on this day hardly shows St James in a flattering light. Jesus nicknamed him and his brother John the Sons of Thunder - perhaps because they were hot tempered, argumentative, noisy - who knows? Whatever the reason, it's an image that has stuck to them across two millennia.

If James and John were among the most fiery of the Twelve, perhaps it's not surprising that they come to ask Jesus if they may have positions of prominence in the new Messianic kingdom. In Mark's Gospel it is the brothers themselves who make this request. Matthew, possibly to save them embarrassment, distances the request from them by ascribing it to their mother. But Jesus treats the request kindly, using it as a further opportunity to try to get his followers to understand the nature of the Kingdom that he is proclaiming. It is one where everything is the opposite of what people expect. Being important, being recognised, being treated like rulers, is not what it is about. 'Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave.' Moreover, Jesus insists that it will involve suffering and death. He will give up his own life as a ransom - and, the implication is, his followers may have to do the same. Our reading from the Acts of the Apostles shows that this was indeed what happened later to James. Whatever his failings when the point of crisis came - when, like all the other disciples, he fled the scene of crucifixion - we see that by the end of the story James had heeded the words of his Lord. He did embrace the life of service that the Gospel demands, and he was prepared to give his life for it if need be. That's why the church keeps this feast.

Perhaps there's another reason too. The thing that I have increasingly come to realise about St James is what he stands for in terms of friendship. I wonder who your real friends are – the ones who would be on your list if you were told that you could only invite a few people to witness something important that you were doing, or something important that was happening to you. The ones you would want with you if you knew you only had twenty-four hours to live. Who would they be?

In Jesus's case, it was Peter, James and John. They were the three present at the raising of Jairus's daughter. They were the three present at the Transfiguration. And they were the three Jesus wanted with him in the Garden of Gethsemane, in his agony, the night before his crucifixion. They must have mattered to him so much, which is why their abandonment of him must have hurt so much too. And yet, in the days following the resurrection, they are forgiven for their failure. The three friends are among those listed at the breakfast on the beach, the scene on the shore of the Sea of Galilee when Jesus rehabilitates Peter after his threefold denial. We can learn from this, too, in how we treat our friends. James and John are among those empowered by that encounter with Jesus after the resurrection to go out and tell the world this extraordinary story. And their willingness to do so is why we are here this morning. Perhaps above all, therefore, we remember St James for the quality of his friendship. One that speaks of welcome, reconciliation and joy.

Wouldn't that be a good thing to be remembered for – the quality of our friendship? I wonder how we would measure up. Perhaps it is our Gethsemane moments that define our friendships. Whether we have been there for each

other when times were unbearable. Whether we have moved mountains to bring comfort at a time of loss, hope at a time of despair, love through a time of loneliness, peace in the middle of a storm. The best friendships are like that. We glimpse in them something of the divine life in which we are invited to share. Christ intimated this to his followers when he told them he was calling them 'not servants, but friends'.

One thing the pandemic has taught us is the importance of staying connected to our friends, however separated we may be from them physically. Keeping in touch, sending an email, making a phone call. Our friendships may go through times of distance or difficulty. Sometimes those we have counted on may even have hurt us. But when that happens, we should keep open the 'door of forgiveness', as Christ did to his friends on the lakeshore. Those whose spiritual inheritors we are as the body of Christ: 'I have called you friends.'

Luke does not tell us, in Acts, why Herod Agrippa had James killed. But the fourth-century historian Eusebius tells a story that James was accused of being a Christian, but witnessed so courageously that his accuser declared himself also to be a Christian, and shared James's death. As they were being led to their execution, the accuser asked forgiveness of James, who granted it with a kiss of peace.

It would be a shame if we only remembered St James by the question he asked of Jesus in our Gospel reading. Let us remember him, as Jesus did, for the quality of his friendship. And hope that, one day, maybe someone might remember us for ours.

Amen.