

FEAST OF ST JAMES – JULY 25th 2010 – CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Psalm 126; Matthew 20:20-28; Acts 11:27-12:2; 2 Corinthians 4:7-15

Heavenly Father, as we reflect on the written word, may we become more faithful in our discipleship of the Living Word, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

What happens when a bolt of lightning instantly heats the air around it to about 30,000 °C? And what happens when that super-heated air instantly expands and contracts as it cools? Well, the rapid expansion and contraction generates sound waves, making a loud noise that is commonly known as ‘thunder’.

Now, the scientific explanation for thunder seems harmless enough, but try explaining that to the frightened dog hiding under the bed or the scared toddler seeking refuge in his mother’s arms. Contrary to what we have been led to believe, thunder is not just the angels in heaven jumping around or God rearranging the furniture. Thunder is loud. Thunder is violent. And sometimes thunder can be downright scary!

And so it was probably not meant as a compliment when Jesus gave James and his brother John the name ‘Sons of Thunder’ (Mark 3:17). Indeed, their fiery reputation was probably well deserved.

But that did not stop Jesus from calling James to be one of his disciples – and with a little help from the Holy Spirit, a character flaw became transformed into a quality. The Lord redirected the zeal of James to serve his purposes. The Lord rechanneled the fire of James to advance his kingdom. And as we review the life and death of this sainted apostle, we may well be led to accept this divine paradox:

A SON OF THUNDER MAKES A BEAUTIFUL NOISE

James was part of Jesus’ inner circle of disciples along with Peter and John. They had seen Jesus raise the daughter of Jairus from the dead. They had witnessed his glory on the mount of transfiguration. They had been taken to pray with him in the Garden of Gethsemane.

For James, however, this special status did not translate into increased coverage in the Gospels. The Gospel of John makes no mention of James at all. The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) record only two conversations between James and Jesus, but even then he is paired with his brother John. And neither of these accounts is particularly flattering.

The first episode is recorded in Luke chapter 9, where the people of a Samaritan village did not welcome Jesus. James and John were annoyed about this and asked the Lord if they should call fire down from heaven to destroy the village – but Jesus turned and rebuked them: “Hey! Cool it guys, Calm down.”

This account reveals a lot about James, and it isn't all bad. James and John were zealous; and they were quick to defend the honour of Jesus and to deal decisively with anyone who disrespected him. There was no doubt that they loved the Lord, and they were eager to show their fierce allegiance to him. But too much zeal, or misguided zeal, can be a bad thing – and so Jesus needed to remind James and John that the reason he had come into the world and into Samaria was not to destroy people, but to save them.

The second conversation between Jesus and James is the one we have in the Gospel reading for today. In the parallel version of the story in Mark's Gospel, James and John ask directly the same question that in Matthew's Gospel is asked by their mother: “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right, and the other at your left, in your kingdom.”

It is easy for us to presume to know what is behind this request of James and John. We could imagine that when no one else was around, the two brothers took Jesus to one side and asked him for the prime positions at his side in heaven. We could determine that their motives were entirely self-centred, and we could condemn them for their actions.

But upon further reflection maybe their motives were not so impure. Perhaps they weren't being so selfish after all. Maybe their request was another example of their Christ-centred zeal. They loved Jesus, they wanted to be with Jesus, and they could think of no greater blessing than to be right next to him in his glory.

However, even if they had the best of intentions, James and John still had a lot to learn – so the Lord seized this opportunity to teach all of the disciples an important spiritual lesson. He wanted them to understand that in God's kingdom greatness comes through service – and Jesus would have to give up his life on the cross before any of them could think about wearing the crown.

Even though it didn't always come out in exactly the right way, we cannot criticize James for his undying devotion. And neither did Jesus. He didn't rebuke James for being disappointed when others turned a cold shoulder towards Jesus. He didn't find fault with James for wanting to be as close to his Saviour as possible. Christ-centred zeal is by definition a good and godly enthusiasm.

But I cannot help but wonder how James would be received by people, even by many Christians, if he were here today. Would people be quick to dismiss James as some kind of Jesus freak? Would they place him in the same category as those street preachers that we come across in Leicester Square and elsewhere? Would we be embarrassed to be in his company because of the way he wears his faith on his sleeve – or would the real source of embarrassment be our own lack of zeal when it comes to our personal relationship with Christ?

Let's face it, we *can* be apathetic, can't we? But there is a cure for apathy – and even though it came at a tremendous price, it costs us absolutely nothing. The cross is God's antidote for every weakness and every sin. Jesus died for those times when we try to do too much and when we don't do enough; when we say the wrong thing and when we fail to say anything. Jesus' undeserved love has set us free. Jesus' unconditional love motivates us to serve. And Jesus' perfect love shaped the Christ-centred devotion of James into a Christ-like zeal.

The only other mention of James is in Acts 12. Luke reports that King Herod Agrippa arrested a number of Christians because he intended to persecute them. And this persecution produced at least one execution, when Herod rendered James the first of the twelve disciples to die a martyr's death.

Some people will be forever remembered in history for their last words. A former Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas à Beckett, said, "I am ready to die for my Lord, that in my blood the Church may obtain liberty and peace." The last words of poet Heinrich Heine were, "God will pardon me; that's his line of work." Louis XIV of France apparently said on his deathbed, "Why do you weep? Did you think I was immortal?" The famous last words of writer Oscar Wilde were, "Either that wallpaper goes, or I do." The final words Jesus spoken from the cross were, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

There are no famous last words attributed to James. His death is summarized in a single Bible verse: "Herod had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword" (Acts 12:2). We don't know what he said – but we don't need to, because his silence speaks volumes. We could even say that by the manner of his death this Son of Thunder made a most beautiful noise.

James was an eager disciple and apostle of Jesus. His enthusiasm for the Lord never wavered, and his desire to be with the Lord was rewarded. Maybe it happened sooner than he had anticipated, and maybe it didn't happen exactly the way he had planned – but in the end, James got his wish. And now, today and forever he is sitting at his Saviour's side in heaven.

This account reminds me of a former friend I was at theological college with. David was the kind of person you couldn't miss. He was about 6'6", very outgoing, super-intelligent, a talented actor, and he played rugby for the university. From the outset of his ordination training, it was almost a foregone conclusion that this larger-than-life chap was going to be a great priest and pastor. And then, on his way home from a church service, just weeks after his ordination as a deacon, David was killed in a tragic car accident.

Some people (myself included) began asking the obvious questions: Why? Why did it happen? There were so many sermons to be preached. There were so many souls to be reached. But in an instant David's life was over. Why did God take him before his time?

Maybe some people in Jerusalem were asking the same questions about James. Jesus had given the disciples the command to go and make disciples of all nations, and they had barely made it past the borders of tiny Judea. If they were going to fulfil the Great Commission, they would need all the apostles working overtime. There were so many sermons to preach. There were so many souls to reach. But without any warning, their brother James was gone. Why did God take him before his time?

Perhaps the Lord used the death of James to strengthen others in their faith. Perhaps the Lord used his example to inspire others to carry on his work. We don't know – and the truth is that we don't know why God allows certain events to happen. I don't know why my friend David died before he became a priest. But you and I both know where James and David are now. Because of Jesus, you and I are reasonably certain about where we are going when we die – and we know what God wants us to be doing on this earth while we are still living.

So let's do it! Let us follow in the footsteps of our sainted brother James. Filled with the same Christ-centred zeal for God and God's Word, and filled with the same Christ-like zeal to save and serve souls, let us seek to glorify God in everything we think and say and do...

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

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