

SERMON FOR ST JAMES' DAY | 14.07.2019

Acts 11: 27 – 12: 2; 2 Corinthians 4: 7-15; St Matthew 20: 20-28

More years ago that I care to remember, at least thirty, Maria and I were part of a huge youth pilgrimage in the Durham Diocese. It involved 400 young people and their leaders walking from Holy Island on the Northumbrian coast down to Monkwearmouth near Sunderland, a distance of about 130 miles. It was due to take a week and we slept in tents along the way.

Taking a youth group unused to walking anywhere was quite something but we had done a bit of training and the weather was good. What we hadn't allowed for was that the organisers were really hardy types who could easily walk 20 miles in a day and they would pop up along the route as the grumbling from the kids grew louder and louder, saying that *the view from around the next corner would make it all worth it!*

Among the many lessons learned from that trip, we certainly discovered that there are no short-cuts in life: you simply have to put one foot in front of the other – and you can either do it with a smile on your face or, like our group of nine teenagers, you can spend a great deal of the time moaning!

There aren't many flattering stories in the Gospel about our patron saint, James, and his brother John. The one we have today is about the way their mother wanted to get them up the heavenly rankings with a special blessing to get them top places by Jesus' side. Not surprisingly the other apostles are pretty angry about this attempt to get honours without effort. The other story is the time when James and John want to punish a small village when they don't receive Jesus with much of a welcome. *Shall we call down fire from heaven to consume them?* James says.

On this St James' Day when we come together to reflect on our life as a parish I want to think about that natural instinct to get cross because it just might give us a bit of an insight into how we tackle this coming year.

Because to be fair, we can all feel for James and John – and indeed for their mother. We work our socks off for some particular cause; we put a load of effort into achieving something and what do we get for our efforts? Understanding, appreciation? Not at all. Often not even a thank you! People don't see the effort we have put in and they certainly don't have the same drive to see that particular piece of work succeed. *If you want to do it, that's fine - but don't come looking to us to pat you on the back.*

And our response is often one of sheer frustration. We think we can see the way ahead so clearly and we wonder why others aren't quite so captivated by the plan as we are. Or we want to push someone forward because they seem to be the right person for a task and others aren't so sure.

My experience of this irritation recently has been the visit of the Archdeacon whose job it is to check on all our paperwork and to make sure all our records are bang up to date, the silver hasn't been pawned off and the protocols about safeguarding, insurance and the hire of the premises are all in good order. Adam and Kerry Sabine, together with the Churchwardens, have been working on inventories, lists and policies for weeks. And of course there is a list a mile long of things that still aren't quite in place.

To this my instinct, I'm afraid, came in the 'fire from heaven' category! I have no time or inclination for all this bureaucracy and Isabel has suitably tried to calm me down!

But the trouble, apart from my natural inclinations which are neither here nor there, is to identify what is worth getting annoyed about. Because there is a substantial part of us which likes to let sleeping dogs lie and to put up with these things because they don't matter very much and would cause a fuss. These checks won't happen again for three years: why get so anxious. And the alternative which is to say, yes, but: all the time we take on these things is at the expense of matters which are far more urgent.

And I open my post, or Google, or any newspaper – and there it all is, issues tumbling out, fighting for my attention: levels of local deprivation astonishingly high, asylum deportation issues unresolved, Ebola an increasing issue in east Africa, knife crime and the abuse of children in all of our churches an outrage... And here I am forced to be concerned about whether our insurance premium has been reviewed this year. *Lord, spare me!*

But where does all that anger really come from? Am I really sufficiently bothered about the Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo to give up going out for dinner and donating the money to charity; am I actually befriending people locally who have run out of funds because of the benefits system? Have we as a Church been that involved in the local asylum seekers centre on Cross Street?

While I am getting cross about our admin, am I actually prepared to change my outlook towards those issues which I know are, on balance, more important?

Or is it a form of spiritual escapism? *Lord, let's call down fire from heaven on those I can't get to see things my way!*

The reason why churches like St James' are so important is that they are – among lots of other things – schools of patience. However frustrating it may be to people whose anger button is a bit close to the surface, churches are places where we have to test out what the Spirit is saying; and not test it out but also find ways of communicating the mind of the Spirit to other people, in ways that they can appreciate and understand. By and large the Church has not been very good at taking time to work out how to get its message across in language that works for people not brought up in the Church.

If I dare to refer quickly to Brexit, what perplexes some of us is why the deadline of October 31st has been made into such a big deal. *We need the result – never mind what that that result is.*

The way Jesus handles the disciples (and also the disciple's mother!) is to challenge the whole notion of a quick fix: *You know the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and their great ones are tyrants over them. (It will...)*

It will not be so among you; whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant.

St Paul expands on this in today's second reading: nothing we receive comes bubble-wrapped, nothing comes out of the box, perfectly intact. No, the truth comes 'knocked about a bit', tested by all sorts of people and in all sorts of ways. And none of it very quickly. Paul's picture is of clay jars. Today we might think of a spreadsheet with ideas here there and everywhere until some kind of consensus emerges – with stuff that seemed precious and valuable left on the margins and things which we thought hopeless and weak suddenly appearing as part of the answer.

And then comes the real challenge: once we have slowed down and begun to see more of what is around us, Jesus throws us a googly: instead of reserved places in the top tier of heaven Jesus tells the disciples that they are for the same path of suffering that he is going to have to endure. It always strikes me, reading the first lesson, that right in the middle of a famine when James is holding the Church together and getting people fed, it is at that very moment that Herod takes him out and executes him.

Why Lord; just when we thought things were stable, do you take out this man when we need him most? What are you doing to us?

Treasure in clay jars. The work of St James' parish is fragile. Actually, since the war it always has been. Apart from a short spell in the late 1980s when it became a wealthy society Church with MPs and bankers a plenty, the records show that St James' has always had to struggle to survive.

But it is a discipline which Jesus knows we need to grasp. No demand for front seats or heavenly fireballs will be as successful as that steady, focused – perhaps slightly unexciting – invitation to walk the road that has been planned for us – not complaining or rushing off in search of something novel and new.

Whoever wishes to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man came not be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for all. On our Patronal Festival we promise to carry on serving that same Jesus: one step at a time, making difficult choices, listening to the Spirit. Being patient; working together to learn the truth.