**SERMON FOR ST JAMES’ DAY | 25.07.21**

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

**St James’: I can’t tell you how often we are confused with our neighbouring St James’ Church to be found in Clerkenwell. I learnt this the painful way some years back when a rather large cheque was, I thought, addressed to us here at St James’ – only to discover later that it was really meant for them!**

**But that is as nothing compared with the plethora of James’ in the Early Church! St James the Lord’s brother who had loads to do with St Paul as the leader of the Church in Jerusalem after the Resurrection is not to be confused with St James the Great or St James’ the Less, or James the writer of the Epistle of James – or any number of apocryphal writers who all bear the same name of James!**

**And it doesn’t help that we have two James’ among the 12 apostles – one, the son of Alphaeus whose mother was at there at Calvary – and the St James who, with his brother John were nicknamed Sons of Thunder by Jesus, the ones who – with St Peter, were with Jesus at those very special moments, the Transfiguration and the Garden of Gethsamane. Yes, that’s our St James’: the closest of Jesus’ friends, the one with the pushy mother who wanted to know if she could take a short cut and book front row seats for her two sons in heaven! So that’s clear then… ?!**

**But on our patronal festival day, what can we take from ‘our’ St James as we begin the long, slow haul out of the Covid pandemic? It might be said that the life of St James the Great doesn’t provide us with a lot to go on!**

**For several years, on our Patronal Festival, I have tried to do a bit of a ‘State of the Union’ reflection. You know how American presidents try, once a year, to take stock of where the nation is – and to lay some pointers to where they might be heading.**

**And I want to start with a very fundamental question: if there were absolutely no churches anywhere, as in the days of St Paul, how would you best start a Church? Two answers come to mind.**

**The first is that you get a group of friends who all believe in Jesus, and you get them to regularly pray together. If they are friends already then hopefully there won’t be too many differences and all will go well. The second way is to find a really clever and charismatic leader who will, with personality and conviction, draw lots of people to come and listen to them. That would also make for a good working Church.**

**And then you might ask: but what did Jesus do?**

**Throughout history there have been any number of churches founded on one or either of these principles. In the first you have a tight knit community of people who think and feel the same. It is very comfortable because if people don’t like what is going on, they are simply invited to leave. On the other hand, there have been so many churches founded on the gifts of a talented leader, one individual who made the church ‘theirs’ by their skills in preaching or whatever. Look at many a Welsh village and you will see scores of (now empty) chapels, one after another, all looking pretty similar to the one next door - but not quite because their leader wanted to do things ‘their way’! Then the leader moves on or dies and the whole Church collapses… It was good while it lasted – but of course it can’t last.**

**Our St James’ Church was founded by the Clothworkers in 1875 to serve what was, at the time, a very poor London neighbourhood – not on the basis of friendship but on the call of Jesus: *come to me all that are heavy laden and I will give you rest.* Over the west door they carved the Clothworkers motto: *our trust in God alone.* Anyone was welcome and, in their poverty - between the wars - people came in droves.**

**But in the face of competition between one brand of churchmanship and another from the early 1970s onwards, instead of being open to all we, like so many parish churches, filled our pews with the like-minded - and for a generation, were numerically pretty ‘successful’; everyone knew everyone else and the friendships of the likeminded were what kept us buoyant; and it bred a huge loyalty to this building.**

**But what about the others: the stranger, the enquirer, the different? What place did they have? What chance was there that a space would be made for them to think or act a bit differently?**

**Reading the New Testament, the way that Jesus ‘planted churches’ – to use the current jargon – was placed in the hands of people like our St James: tempted by his mother to take a shortcut to heaven; bad-tempered enough to be called a Son of Thunder; liable to misunderstand events as they unfolded around him or to fall asleep at the crucial moment – and yet in the end to become such a confounded irritant to Herod and the religious powers of the time that he was the first Apostle to be executed. In St Paul’s terms what treasures we have are to be held in fragile, easily broken clay jars. Why? *So that our power is shown to belong to God and does not come from us.***

**And this is what it means to be an authentic part of Christ’s family, the Church. Not wrapped up a rosy glow of the like-minded but to be in regular communion with people with whom, in normal circumstances, we would have absolutely nothing else in common.**

**And that is why parish churches like ours are absolutely vital to God’s mission and why I disagree so wholeheartedly with the new call of ‘Mosaic’ and others to plant endless new churches – in coffee shops or in people’s front rooms or in the local gym. What we would be doing is seeing people gathering together as friends, around whatever leader the group felt comfortable with. And like all those chapels in the Welsh valleys, it would miss the fundamental challenge – that you and I are called to serve God not because we think the same or even particularly like each other, but because we share the same treasure: faith and trust in Jesus. And it is not easy! Which is why we need to have that phrase ringing in our ears: *Look how these Christians love one another*: not because we are all the same or share common interests but because of what God is calling us to do together. These large buildings are not just historic ‘handicaps’ to mission, they are fundamental: everyone can come in; there are no special places for some and not for others. They offer a welcome and a freedom of movement that coffee shops and private houses can never achieve.**

**But we all recognise that it’s a hard slog: with no short cuts! Which is why St Paul says in the second reading: *we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake.* It is in our willingness to be spent and sometimes taken for a ride; it is in our support for the vulnerable, the visitor and the down-right bloody-minded who want to take power back and make life more comfortable, that St Paul teaches us: *we suffer all this so that the real life of Jesus may be made visible*. Going for broke setting up more and more churches may seem like a plausible idea: in fact it is running away from the real challenge, a willingness to cooperate.**

**Let me end with a small story from Barack Obama’s wonderful book ‘A promised land’. In a particularly purple passage he relates the difficulties he had had as President, trying to balance the need to save the lives of young American servicemen and women in Afghanistan with the task of keeping the peace in that very troubled land. He was clearly worn out by the struggle and yet he had been honoured with the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts. But the award meant a very long flight to Oslo in freezing weather and he eventually arrived at the hotel dog tired, wanting to simply crash out for a couple of hours.**

**And then his wife Michelle called to him to look out of the window. And there, in the snow, he saw a huge crowd of people standing looking up at him. Each was holding a candle and, he was told later, they did this for every winner of the Peace Prize. It was the offering of ordinary people, wanting to encourage those who took big risks against the odds to bring Peace, that their work was not in vain: that the crowd understood the costs involved. We are not in this ministry for ourselves but, especially in the face of Covid-19, we are being called like St James himself, to be living sacrifices. And with no short cuts.**