

The feast of St James the Apostle 25th July 2010

Today we celebrate the feast of St James.

And well you might ask, which James?

For as you all know, there are four James' mentioned in the New Testament!

Well, the James we are celebrating today is not James the brother of Jesus, known often as James the Just for his adherence to the Jewish law. He it was who wrote the epistle of James.

Neither is the James we are remembering today James, the son of Alphaeus, one of the twelve apostles.

Neither are we remembering James the brother of another apostle, Judas (not Iscariot).

No, today we are celebrating the life of James the Apostle, brother of John the apostle and son of Zebedee.

This is the James, who with his brother John left his fishing nets by Lake Galilee to follow Jesus (Matthew 4.22)

The James who was one of an inner circle of disciples with John and Peter, who was a witness to the raising of Jairus' daughter (Mark 5.37) and Jesus' transfiguration (Mark 9.2).

The James, who with his brother John was nicknamed Boanerges, sons of thunder (Mark 3.17) and who offered to call down destruction on a Samaritan village that rejected Jesus (Luke 9.54).

The same James who was martyred for his faith in Jesus (Acts 12.2).

And the James who, as we heard in our Gospel this morning, aided and abetted by the archetypal pushy parent asked Jesus if he might sit at his right or left hand in Jesus' kingdom.

A request that resulted in Jesus words:

“Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant,

And whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave,

Just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

You see, whilst James was working with an earthly model of greatness, based on the exercise of power and demonstration of status, Jesus was working with a very different model.

A model of greatness through service.

And it is this model of greatness that Jesus not only taught, but demonstrated in his way of life, his teaching and healing ministry, his washing the disciples feet, and ultimately in his laying down his life for humanity in his death on the cross.

And as Jesus expected James to follow his example, so Jesus obviously expects us to too.

So, as we look at Jesus' example, what do we learn about greatness through service?

Well, let's look firstly at what Jesus' example doesn't teach us, for its easy to get in quite a muddle about service.

Jesus' example certainly doesn't show us that to be a servant means to be a doormat.

Jesus had a clear sense of purpose, deriving from his closeness to God the Father and being obedient to him.

And Jesus was determined to be about his Father's business no matter what. Where people wanted things that were incompatible with his pursuit of this service of God, he stuck resolutely to his calling.

Jesus' example also clearly shows us that to serve others does not mean to be available 24/7 to everyone to do everything.

Jesus took time out to pray; to be with his Father.

He took time away from the crowds to teach his disciples.

Bounded by a physical body, by time and space, Jesus had to set priorities and make difficult choices – and he could not physically do everything that everyone might want.

I wonder how often we get frustrated and tied up in guilt, because we haven't managed to do everything that people wanted of us; or indeed everything that we might want to do ourselves.

It's hard to say "no" to people; to not meet their needs, or wants.

But this is why we need to be like Jesus; to take time out to be with our Father in heaven, to pray; so that with a clear sense of what he wants us to do, and

therefore what he doesn't want us to do, we can say yes to some things and no to others with a clear conscience.

When I was at theological college one of my lecturers asked me a strange question, "Gary, you're not the Messiah, are you?"

"No" I replied.

"Then it's not your job to save the world. Leave that to Jesus."

He was right. Saving the world is Jesus' job. We are just called to be faithful servants of Jesus – doing the tasks he gives us, and leaving the rest.

The other thing Jesus teaches us is that service is not the way to win God's favour.

After all, Jesus didn't need to win God's favour.

Neither do we!

God loves us passionately. His favour does not need to be earned for he gives it to us freely. Indeed, his favour cannot be earned because as God he deserves all of us, totally.

No, service does not earn God's favour.

But it is a way in which we can express our gratitude to and love for God; in response to all that he has done for us.

If you are one of these people who has always been taught that love is earned, give it up now.

You can't earn God's love by what you do.

Just accept it; and then show your gratitude in the way you live.

So, if Jesus' example shows us what service isn't, what does it show us positively?

Well, surely it shows us is that to serve is to seek the good of the other, not counting the cost to oneself.

This is what Jesus demonstrated in his washing of the disciple's feet.

And this is what he supremely did on the cross – winning the salvation we so badly needed, as he laid aside his own rights, desires and life.

Surely Paul was writing about Jesus above all others when he wrote in 1 Corinthians 13.4-7:

"Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not

rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

But this kind of service; this kind of love; is costly.

It involves putting ourselves out – not just doing the acts of service and love that we want to do, but also the ones we don’t want to do, or just can’t be bothered with.

John Egglan awoke on a January morning in 1850 to see deep snow on the ground. His inclination was not to bother to try to get to church; surely no one else would attempt to go either.

But he changed his mind; after all, he was a deacon of the Baptist church and he should really make the effort. After walking the six miles to church, he arrived to a congregation of twelve and a thirteen year old boy.

The preacher never arrived.

The small congregation was ready to pack up and go home. But John, who had never preached in his life and had no desire to do so felt compelled to say something.

His sermon was short and uninspiring.

Until at the end he felt God prompt him to say to the boy, “Look! Look to Jesus! Look! Look! Look!”

The boy later said, “I did look, and then and there the cloud on my heart lifted, the darkness rolled away, and at that moment I saw the sun.”

That boy was Charles Spurgeon, the great preacher who towered over Victorian Christianity.

All because John Egglan chose not to take the easy route and go home, but because he chose to serve.

Jesus said, “Come to me all who are heavy laden and I will give you rest”.

He also said, “If anyone would be my disciple, he must tack up his cross daily and follow me.”

You often hear it said that Christianity is a crutch for the weak. It is.

But Christianity is also a call to live life courageously and selflessly in the service of God and others.

So may we each not be afraid to live great lives, by being a servant.