

## The Feast of St James (The Great)

Sermon for the Parish of South Darebin, 21 July 2024

Jeremiah 45; Psalm 126; 2 Corinthians 4: 7–15; Matthew 20: 20–28

Do you want to be important? Do you want your children or grandchildren to be important?

I guess that our society isn't much different from any other society. We recognise importance!

There are important people and others who are not deemed to be that important, at least by our society. Politicians, royalty, award winning actors, elite athletes, winners of medals, receivers of awards on Australia Day and the King's birthday, magnates of commerce and industry, bishops and archbishops, school House Captains, school prefects, ... I could go on and on... all these in at least some circles are seen to be 'important people' and 'more important' than others.

Some years ago, I was one of the Archbishop's examining chaplains. For quite a few years I was asked to speak about the Ordinal – those sections of our Prayer Book that are laid out for the making of deacons and the ordination of Priests and Bishops in the church. I was speaking to the men and women in the Year of Discernment who were in the process of discerning God's call to them. I used to ask them, 'Who is the most important in God's Church? Is it the Primate, the Archbishop, the Bishops, the Priests, the Deacons or the Laity? Well, I might ask you the same question – I wonder what your answer is? Who is the most important?

Of course, the answer is that *no one* is the most important in the Church of God – each person in God's Church, each person in God's Kingdom, is just as important as everyone else. As St Paul states in Galatians Chapter 3:

As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (3: 27 – 28)

The truth is that in God's eyes, everyone is as important as everyone else. In Acts 10: 34, Peter stated (while quoting the Old Testament) that he fully understood that God shows no partiality towards people.

Everyone is equal in God's eyes. Everyone is important. You are important. Jesus made it clear that just as we all are important to God, all have a task to do in God's Kingdom, you and me alike.

Our Gospel reading today recounts an occasion when James, brother of John and son of Zebedee, whose feast day it is today, together with his brother John, through their mum, tried to negotiate being made the number one and number two positions in God's Kingdom. Wow! Now that's an ask, don't you think?

In first century, Middle Eastern thinking, the best positions in any setting were indicated by who was sitting to the right and left of the host, or the King in a kingdom. So, it was no small request they were making – in fact they were asking to be really important, more important than any of the other disciples (or anyone else, for that matter).

I don't think we should be too shocked by this flaw in James - to want to be important. After all, like every Saint of God, he was a flawed person. We are all flawed people, and we all make mistakes. 'There is none righteous, not even one!' (Romans 3: 10)

At the time that this request was made, James already had a significant ministry as a disciple of Jesus.

Originally a fisherman, James:

- was one of the first disciples to be called by Jesus to follow Him
- was privileged, with his brother John, and fellow worker Peter, to witness the transfiguration of Jesus (the only three disciples to do so)
- was privileged, with Peter and John, to be present at the raising of Jairus's daughter from the dead
- was present, watching from a distance with Mary the mother of Jesus and some of the others, at the crucifixion of Jesus, although many others, including Peter, had run away
- like all the disciples, witnessed many of Jesus's miracles and had been privy to Jesus's teaching, both private and public.

Finally, of course happening well after today's gospel account, James was the first apostle to be martyred, and the only one recorded in the Bible. Acts 12: 2 tells us 'King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword.'

So, you see, from a human point of view, James would have been seen to be one of the 'important' disciples. But when he and his brother asked to be given such elevated positions in Jesus' kingdom, Jesus very gently pointed out to them that they didn't know what they were asking for.

They were already very close to Jesus, as were all the disciples, and Jesus pointed out to them that this meant that both James and his brother must be able to 'drink the cup' that he would drink – that is, the cup of persecution and death. The young men insisted that they could do so, and Jesus told them that indeed they would, but then added, the number one and two seats in his kingdom were not his to give – only the Father could do that.

Then, Matthew records for us in his gospel a wonderful vignette – a brief but so weighty teaching from Jesus concerning apparent 'greatness'. If you glance back

at our gospel reading to verse 25 you will see that Matthew records these words of Jesus:

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but 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 a ransom for many.”

Do you see? James and John, like every Christian person, were not called to importance, they were called to be servants. Jesus outlined the enigma – anyone who wants to be first among you, must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve .... (and here is the crunch!) ... and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Throughout all his teaching, Jesus had made it very clear. There is a cost in discipleship. We are not called to be important in the human sense of that word. We are called to be the servants of others. James and John were called to be servants of others, so are we.

We know that post resurrection, James went on to be a great leader in the church – he was indeed a pillar of the early church, but he was also its servant. Like his Lord and teacher, James gave up his life in martyrdom because he did not shrink back from loyalty to his Lord.

In our second lesson this morning, St Paul gives us some more insight into what true Christian service looks like. Just previously to our passage, Paul has been saying that we are engaged in ministry, not through any cleverness of our own, but through God’s mercy. He reminds us that our task is not to ‘big-note ‘ ourselves, but rather it is to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as slaves for Jesus’ sake. Let me read, starting from the verse just before this morning’s epistle reading:

For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. (2 Corinthians 4: 7)

Despite his ill-informed and inappropriate request to have the place of most importance in the heavenly kingdom, St James went on to live for Christ in the way that Paul has just described and to give his life up in service of Christ.

Brothers and sisters, let us learn from St James, apostle and martyr, this lesson of humility and servitude as we continue to live for the risen Christ in our present world, knowing that any who would be great, must be the servant of all. As Jesus gently taught James and his brother, life in Him, is not about importance, 'lording it over others' is not the mark of a Christian. Servitude to others, given in love, is what marks a Christian.

Jesus said to his disciples:

'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 a ransom for many.' (Matthew 20)