

A Sermon for the Feast of St. James with the following readings:-

Acts 11v.27-12v.2

Matthew 20 v.20-28

“ Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see,
And what I do in anything
To do it as for thee”

George Herbert's poem goes on (as I'm sure many of you know it as a hymn we used to sing often)

“A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine”

The clause is “FOR THY SAKE”

If we could have used this clause “FOR THY SAKE” in everything we have tried to do in this period of lock down (including much we might categorize as drudgery, frustration, boredom, difficulty, isolating, disappointing) we would end this time much richer than we started. Herbert proposes that this tincture-recognition of God's intention “turneth all to gold”. What a faithful reward for our patience and endurance!

To be given a reward for one's contribution to society (be it community, church, family) is one thing: to ask for or even demand a reward is quite another. Sometimes there's an expectation that for hard graft or suffering sacrifice there should be a reward. It's mostly implicit in all our relationships. Sometimes, neighbours think you deserve it. Once, my Mum was told “Ann, you'll get your reward in heaven” after she had been called to much duty in the family.

She replied “I'd like a bit of it now, please!!”

Mrs Zebedee wanted a bit of it now, too. She asks Jesus for a favour. In Matthew's Gospel she is the initiator. In Mark, her boys ask instead. “I want my twin sons, James and John, to sit one on your right and the other on your left when you come into your Kingdom”. This is how it is in the earthly kingdoms she knows. She wants the best for her boys, but isn't she being a bit pushy ?. That's what the other disciples think. Perhaps she even wants to bask in their glory when the time comes for the ultimate reward to be conferred. And, in any case, this reward is due to them for all that she has lost and they have done!

On this St. James'tide, we remember not only this, but also how James and John left their nets and the family business AND their home without, it seems, much thought for her feelings. They both followed this man Jesus who had made them different from the way she had brought them up. They had become “special” to him, unlike the rest of them-so they deserved recognition. Unbeknown to her at the time, they would die for him. James would be beheaded by Herod Antipas after he had become head of the Church in Jerusalem. (That's why we celebrate his martyrdom and sainthood on this day). It is even suggested that, after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection James evangelised Spain but “he made few converts!”-that has no Biblical foundation but it is believed according to tradition. As for John-that's another story.

Even we may think (like his mother) that they should be rewarded for all this graft and eventual sacrifice. I think we would agree with the Church that that should be so. But there's something else in this reading that we should note, too.

In answer to a question by Jesus, they reply with great confidence that they can drink the same cup as he would. They will in the end do so by draining it to the dregs, like He did. When they saw two thieves crucified on either side of Jesus on Golgotha, one on his right and the other on his left, surely this was a moment of illumination about Christian places of honour. Here is glory but only as we come to know it. On the cross, God's will is done. Jesus cannot promise what will happen to them because it is not in his gift.

Every time we pray the Lord's prayer, we pray :

“Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”

I'm reminded of a comment made by William Temple that “when you invoke the Holy Spirit to enable your prayers, you may get more than you bargained for”. Faith in Jesus is not about bargaining especially with God (although I have heard prayers expressed that way when people are desperate for their loved ones).No! Jesus through his life of love bought back (redeemed), people from every slavery which imprisons them like striving for power, the place of honour, requiring riches. This is the ransom he refers to.

So those disciples are told that if they want to be great or first they must seek the humility of putting everyone ahead of themselves in all the most ordinary events of life. That is to be the way with us. That is the Christian life, that is the way of salvation, that's what makes you different, for his sake that “turneth everything to gold “!!

No wonder we need to pray with all humility:

“Teach us, good Lord, to serve thee as thou deservest,

To give and not to count the cost,

To fight and not to heed the wounds,

To toil and not to seek for rest,

To labour and not to ask for any reward save that of knowing that we do thy will”

Such is the cup we drink unto eternal life. Most of us can't rise to the occasion most of the time-BUT HE DID-for his Father's sake and the World's.

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