

SUNDAY REFLECTIONS

Sunday 25 July 2021 | James the Apostle

TODAY'S READINGS

Jeremiah 45.1-5 | Psalm 126 | Acts 11.27-12.2 | Matthew 20.17-28



✚ In the name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is St James' day. What comes to mind when you hear the word 'saint'?

Perhaps an image in a stained-glass window, or an icon, of a serious looking person with a halo round their head. One of the apostles, like St James, or even an angel like St Michael. Maybe you think of one of those people throughout history who have been granted this accolade, like St Thomas-a-Becket. Or maybe someone from our modern era whose good works have led to them being regarded as a saint, like Mother Theresa. Perhaps you think of someone you know or knew, a really nice helpful person, whom you would describe as an 'absolute saint'. You might even turn to popular culture and call to mind someone who plays for Southampton football club, or 'Saint and Greavesy' or even Roger Moore as Simon Templar (although Andrew probably hasn't a clue what I'm talking about now! The girl group All Saints is more his generation.)

A dictionary will tell us that the word 'saint' comes from the Latin word 'sanctus' corresponding to the Greek ἅγιος and means 'holy'. It conveys the dual concept of intrinsic purity, and also being set aside for sacred purposes, as exemplified by the virgin Mary, innocent herself and consecrated to be the mother of God's Son. 'Sanctified' comes from the same root and so we might say that a saint is someone who has been sanctified, although that is rather a circular definition which does not give us much more understanding.

The obvious place to look for an understanding of 'saint' is the Bible. Strangely, if you look it up in the New Revised Standard Version, there is not a single reference to 'saint'. You might wonder if it is a modern language issue, but on checking the King James Version still we only find 5 references, and just one of these is in the New Testament. However, there are 93 references to 'saints' in the KJV, and again 64 references to 'saints' in the NRSV, all except one in the New Testament. So, we see that 'saint' is never used in the Bible as a title for a particular individual. Instead, we find it most frequently in the epistles, used to address all the Christians in one city – for example in Romans 1:7 *'To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be **saints**'* which shows that being a saint is something to which we are called. Paul also writes in Philippians 1:1 *'Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons'*, which might seem to imply that the bishops and deacons were not saints, but in fact shows that all the people in the church were saints, of whom some were bishops and deacons.

So, if you want to see a saint this morning, don't look at the stained-glass windows, look around you. The people of God are the saints. This is not to claim that we are all perfect and holy, but it is

what we are called to be as followers of Jesus. Paul describes himself as *'the very least of all the saints'* and also as *'... sinners, of whom I am the chief'* so saint and sinner are not mutually exclusive. Note it is not *'... sinners, of whom I was the chief'*. Paul sees his sanctification, literally being changed into a saint, as a work in progress. He may have received forgiveness in his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, but the process of sanctification goes on throughout his life.

Let's consider James, to see this in action. I always feel sorry for James because the readings chosen for his feast day don't do him any credit. Admittedly there is not a lot written about him, but this account of him and John wanting the best seats in Christ's kingdom shows him in a very bad light. Let's go back to the beginning of the story.

Mark's gospel suggests that Jesus just happened to meet Peter and Andrew fishing, then James and John, as they were mending their nets. He called them and they followed him. But in John's gospel, we learn that Andrew at least was a disciple of John the Baptist, and quite possibly the others too. So, James may well have been a man who was seeking God, who was dissatisfied with the formal religion of the day and saw in John the Baptist a vitality that the rabbis lacked. Then John points his disciples to Jesus *'Behold the Lamb of God'* and when Jesus calls James to follow, he does so. This is the first decisive step on the route towards being a saint. From then on, his life would never be the same again. It did not mean that he instantly became perfect, not by any means, but he was heading in the right direction.

In the rest of the gospels, we hear only of two actions of James – the story we had read to us today and another occasion when he and John asked Jesus if they should call down fire from heaven on a village that did not want to receive Jesus. Thus far, it is clear that little of the humility and love displayed by Jesus had been absorbed by his disciple. But we do also read that James was one who clung closely to Jesus, and whom Jesus kept close to himself. Andrew was stressing to us last week, the importance of taking time out to be close to Jesus, and this was certainly a lesson that James had learnt. He saw all that Jesus did and heard all that he said. James was one of the three disciples who were with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. He was one of the three who accompanied Jesus at the healing of Jairus's daughter. In the Garden of Gethsemane James was one of the three disciples chosen to be closest to Jesus as he prayed. Admittedly, he fell asleep, but then, as throughout the whole ministry of Jesus, James was keeping close to Jesus. And even though, along with all the other disciples, James fled at the arrest of Jesus, three evenings later he is there in the Upper Room when the resurrected Jesus appears. Later on, in the last chapter of John's gospel, John tells us that *'the sons of Zebedee'* were among the seven disciples who met Jesus

by lake Galilee. Unlike Thomas, you couldn't keep James away, he always wanted to be in the thick of the action, close to Jesus.

After Pentecost we only hear one more mention of James, in this passage from Acts where Herod has him killed. Jesus had asked the brothers if they were able to drink the cup that he would drink, and they rashly said 'Yes'. As with so much that Jesus said, they did not understand at the time what he was talking about, but he spoke of his imminent ordeal at Calvary. He knew that, as his followers, a similar fate awaited them, and so it turned out to be, James here in Acts and John much later. Being a saint, small letter or capital letter, is not opting for an easy life. 'Saint and martyr' is a description of hundreds of thousands of people down through the centuries, famous or known only to God. Anyone who sets out to follow Jesus can expect at least ridicule and at worst persecution and death.

So, as we commemorate Saint James today, it is a good opportunity to examine ourselves to see where we are on the journey towards being a saint. Have we responded to the call of Jesus to follow him? Do we pay careful attention to the words of Jesus? Do we spend time in prayer with him? Do we make sure that we are regular in the company of others who follow Jesus? Are we prepared to be rebuked by Jesus' words when our behaviour does not match his? And are we willing to witness to our Lord whatever the cost to ourselves?

We started by seeking to define a saint. The example of James shows us that a saint is a sinner who has heard the call of Jesus, has responded to it, wants to stay close to Jesus, and is in process of being changed to be more like Jesus. They know that throughout the ups and downs of life, and beyond, Jesus will stay close to them.

✠ In the name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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CHURCH OF ENGLAND RESOURCES

<https://www.churchofengland.org/>

<https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/join-us-service-daily-prayer>

The Church of England online weekly service for today can be found [here](#).



THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND

The Collect
for James the Apostle

**Merciful God,
whose holy apostle Saint James,
leaving his father and all that he had,
was obedient to the calling of your Son Jesus Christ
and followed him even to death:
help us, forsaking the false attractions of the world,
to be ready at all times to answer your call without delay;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.**

Old Testament Reading

The word that the prophet Jeremiah spoke to Baruch son of Neriah, when he wrote these words in a scroll at the dictation of Jeremiah, in the fourth year of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah: Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, to you, O Baruch: You said, 'Woe is me! The Lord has added sorrow to my pain; I am weary with my groaning, and I find no rest.' Thus you shall say to him, 'Thus says the Lord: I am going to break down what I have built, and pluck up what I have planted—that is, the whole land. And you, do you seek great things for yourself? Do not seek them; for I am going to bring disaster upon all flesh, says the Lord; but I will give you your life as a prize of war in every place to which you may go.'

New Testament Reading

At that time prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world; and this took place during the reign of Claudius. The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea; this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

About that time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword.

Gospel Reading

While Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside by themselves, and said to them on the way, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised.'

Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favour of him. And he said to her, 'What do you want?' She said to him, 'Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.' But Jesus answered, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?' They said to him, 'We are able.' He said to them, 'You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.'

When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. But Jesus called them to him and said, '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.'

Prayers of Intercession

Encouraged by our fellowship with all the saints,
let us make our prayers to the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Father, your Son called men and women to leave the past behind them and to follow him as his disciples in the way of the cross. Look with mercy upon those whom he calls today, marks with the cross and makes his disciples within the Church.

Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy.

Your Son told his disciples not to be afraid and at Easter breathed on them his gift of peace. Look with mercy upon the world into which he sent them out, and give it that peace for which it longs.

Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy.

Your Son formed around him a company who were no longer servants but friends, and he called all those who obeyed him his brother and sister and mother. Look with mercy upon our families and our friends and upon the communities in which we share.

Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy.

Your Son sent out disciples to preach and heal the sick. Look with mercy on all those who yearn to hear the good news of salvation, and renew among your people the gifts of healing.

Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy.

Your Son promised to those who followed him that they would sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel and would share the banquet of the kingdom. According to your promise, look with mercy on those who have walked with Christ in this life and now have passed through death.

Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy.

Almighty God,
Grant that your Church
may faithfully hold and make known
the faith that has come to us through the apostles,
that with them and all your saints
we may inherit the glories of eternal life;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**