

Readings and Sermon 25th July 2021 Feast of St James

Collect

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.

Jeremiah 45: 1 – 8

45 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: ² Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, to you, O Baruch: ³ You said, “Woe is me! The LORD has added sorrow to my pain; I am weary with my groaning, and I find no rest.” ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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.”

Acts 11: 27 – 12:2

²⁷ At that time prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ 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. ²⁹ The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers^[a] living in Judea; ³⁰ this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

James Killed and Peter Imprisoned

12 About that time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. ² He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword.

Matthew 20:20-28 NRSV

Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favor 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.”

Rev. Susan's Sermon – 25.07.21

Jeremiah 45: 1 – 8

Acts 11: 27 – 12:2

Matthew 28: 20 – 28

My grandson was deeply disappointed recently. No great tragedy – he hadn't lost his health or his job – but a disappointment just the same. He was overjoyed to be offered a transfer to the department he'd always hoped to work for, but his current department made so many difficulties and delays that the vacancy had to be filled by someone else, and he'd lost his chance. But tomorrow he starts in a new and different post, which is even nearer to his dream post.

So often unexpected goods and new directions can spring out of frustrations and even real tragedies. Jeremiah was warning about a real disaster, a real loss. Jerusalem really was destroyed, the Temple was demolished, many people were killed, the elite taken into captivity in Babylon – faithful Jews in Babylon – and scattered throughout the Babylonian empire – had to discover new ways of worshipping, and living as good Jews wherever they were. And over the centuries as one empire succeeded another to dominate the region, those little groups of Jews who'd long become established in far flung cities far from Jerusalem bore faithful witness and attracted interest and debate from non-Jews.

Jesus lived and proclaimed the kingdom of God, in Judaea – and word spread along the trade-routes and the pilgrims-routes outside the boundaries. Jesus died, and his followers preached a new life and new beginnings. Persecution followed, and as his followers spread out from Jerusalem they found audiences in synagogues further afield.

There was already a Christian community in Damascus in Syria when Saul set out on a journey to attack them – and was unexpectedly converted on the Damascus road.

There was already an enthusiastic Christian community in Antioch when new missionaries came from Cyprus and from Cyrene in North Africa. It was a Jew from Cyprus – Barnabas – whom the apostles sent from Jerusalem to represent them, and who fetched in Saul to help him build up the extended church. The church in Antioch grew and flourished. It was here that followers of the way first took on the name of Christ, and called themselves Christians.

To Antioch came prophets from Jerusalem prophesying wide-spread famine. The church in Antioch decided to do what it could to send help to the mother church in Jerusalem to which it owed so much – and appointed Barnabas and Saul to bring it – just as another wave of persecution hit the church ('And that began the journeys of Barnabas and Paul ...')

Herod Agrippa laid violent hands on James, the brother of John, and killed him; Peter was to be next – he was imprisoned and his execution planned. (These three – Peter, James and John – had been the closest companions of Jesus, with him on the raising of Jairus' daughter, on the Mount of Transfiguration, in the Garden of Gethsemane – the pillars of the church, now threatened with destruction.)

So we're subtly reminded, by the way the story in Acts is presented, that persecution and destruction can lead to unexpected development and growth; a promise of hope in the bleakest of moments.

The Gospel reading reminds us how much James and John, and the others had already had to learn. When their mother requests the seats of honour next to Jesus when he comes into his kingdom, Jesus tells them they don't know what they're talking about. They don't understand the nature of his kingship. Are they able to share in the cup Jesus is about to drink? Yes, yes, of course they can.

But they don't realise what that cup they hope to share means, just as they don't realise that the king in the kingdom of heaven is not there to lord it over them, but to serve them. The cup which Jesus will share with his disciples (not just with James and John) is the sign of his coming death, the cup which Jesus, in his agony at

Gethsemane, begs his Father to spare him, if it's in any way possible. But accepts. The cup Jesus promises to share with them is the sign of a life given up for the sake of others. It's the cup which, despite pandemic precautions, is shared on behalf of all at every Eucharist, live or online.

So it's not just a question for James and John and the others; it's a question for all of us who call ourselves Christian. Do we understand what it means to share the cup? Are we prepared, in God's name, despite the difficulty and the demand, to give it a try?

James and John agreed to it too readily, before they understood. Jesus himself would gladly have passed it over if God could have spared him. So what can give us the courage to say yes, knowing what we undertake, and to persist with it?

This is not a cup we have to drink alone. We share it with Jesus. We share it with the body – the widespread diverse body – of the church. We make our promises – and keep them – with God's help. We are reminded of them and renew them wherever we celebrate Eucharist together.

And God still has this habit of astonishing us by bringing unexpected good, from unexpected sources, even when things seem to be at their worst. We depend on God, and on others, for love and companionship, compassion and generosity. As others depend on us. Are we ready?