

**‘To be a Pilgrim’**  
**A Sermon for the Feast of St James, Apostle**  
**Given at St Davids Cathedral by the Dean on Sunday 25 July 2021**

St James, also known as James the Great, was a Galilean fisherman, who, with his brother John was among the first disciples called by Jesus. They, with Peter, were in some ways his ‘inner circle’, witnessing the raising of Jairus’ daughter, and his transfiguration; and with him – though sleeping – as he prayed in Gethsemane before his arrest and crucifixion. As our gospel recounted, the other disciples were annoyed at them and their mother’s ambition – (they were known as the sons of Thunder, and perhaps she, not their father, was the thunder!). James was a leader of the Jerusalem church after the resurrection, until his martyrdom by Herod around AD44.

What is said to have happened next is particularly interesting to us at St Davids – though traditions and historians are by no means in agreement. It is told that his body was taken to Compostela and he became the patron saint of Spain, and also of pilgrimage. Pilgrimage to Santiago di Compostela certainly goes back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century and probably beyond. Pilgrimage here we date to Dewi’s time: we know with a fair degree of certainty that Irish monks came to be part of this holy man’s community. But Santiago di Compostela got its great boost as a pilgrim destination in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century when particular privileges were declared by Pope Callixtus II – whom we remember for saying that two pilgrimages here were of equal value to one to Rome.

James has remained part of the pilgrim tradition here. If you were to go into Holy Trinity chapel – which, I’m afraid, we have had to close to general visiting because it is so narrow that social distancing is impossible – you would see a 14<sup>th</sup> century carving above the altar, with four figures, two either side of Christ on the cross with Mary and John at its feet. Three are dressed in long flowing robes, fitting for the apostles Paul, Peter and Andrew. But James is dressed entirely differently, as you can see in picture on our Facebook page ‘thought for today’. He’s the archetypal medieval pilgrim, in the garb prescribed by various popes: his wide brimmed hat, for sunshine or showers, with a still half-discernible badge to show he’s pilgrim not vagabond; his long cloak, both for cold and rain, and as a good blanket; his sturdy staff, for defence and support; his scrip – his satchel-like bag; and in one hand perhaps his pilgrim’s water bottle, or the Scriptures.

The Church of that time was saying ‘The message of St James for you today, is: Be a pilgrim.’ For us today, the message is the same, even if our dress is not – though pilgrims today may still hang a scallop shell from their rucksack, or have a badge on lapel or stick. Be a pilgrim. We may think of short pilgrimages (you can find even half-day pilgrimages around St Davids, on the Cathedral’s website), or longer; or view all of life through the pilgrim lens. But generally, pilgrims are seeking much the same, as we walk our way into our future: answers for questions, solutions for problems, healing for life’s woundings, forgiveness for particular wrongs or the burdensomeness of the fallibilities of being ‘only human’, renewal, refreshment, a fresh start ... Any or all of this, as well as plumbing the depths of the big existential questions, about meaning, purpose, significance, and integrity, and to know ourselves loved by the God who is love.

So what does St James himself have to teach us specifically about the pilgrim life? I’d like to highlight two lessons, the first being the readiness to heed Jesus’ call promptly. This is reflected in our first encounter with James in Scripture, in Mark 1:16-20. Jesus is passing by

the Sea of Galilee. He sees the fishermen Simon (Peter) and his brother Andrew and says 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' They immediately they left their nets and followed him. As little farther on he sees James and his brother John, in their boat mending the nets. He called them too, and they similarly left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

It's not just about taking a decision to follow Jesus once for all. It is also about being ready to keep listening, and keep following close to Christ, as the journey of life presents us with forks in the road, crossroads, and occasions for making a choice, taking a decision, about the way ahead.

And yet, if we find we've made a detour of our own choosing, inadvertently or deliberately, Jesus will still call us back, and help us find the road again. We just have to listen, and respond promptly. '*Now* is the time of salvation!' writes Paul (2 Cor 6:2), every present moment being just such a 'now'.

My second point, arising from today's gospel reading (Mt 20:20-28), is of the shape of the pilgrim life as we follow Jesus' example. Leadership and success are not about hierarchy, status, or getting our own way. It lies in serving others, in building one another up, in helping us all to follow Jesus, and to grow in Christlikeness.

Life's pilgrim journey may well be hard, and all of us are only human, only clay jars, as our Epistle reading put it. But we have far more to defend and support us than merely the 14<sup>th</sup> century pilgrim hat, cloak and staff aimed at protecting physical wellbeing. As St Paul wrote to the Corinthians, we have the extraordinary power of God with us, the closer we are to Christ. So even if we find affliction, perplexity, persecution and so on, we need not be crushed, despairing or overwhelmed. In all of life, we're able to find the abundant life that Jesus brought (John 10:10) welling irrepressibly up in us.

And so, even in the dismaying face of our mortality, we can be caught up in the death of Christ who conquered death, and who through his resurrection, brings life beyond. As our reading says 'The one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also.' So even when life brings us tears, as today's Psalm says, we can keep sowing the seed even in our weeping: knowing that we can always invest in a future where there will be God-given harvest (Ps 127:6,7).

So be encouraged on your pilgrim journey, however daunting the route it takes. Everything in life can be used by God for good, for, as the final sentence of our second reading says, everything is for our sake, for us here; and for the sake of the world God made and all life in it: God's redeeming love overflowing more and more, in us and through us – so we can live lives of thanksgiving, gratitude, through God's limitless grace, for our salvation and joy, and for the glory of his holy name.

May you know that grace, that joy, that love – and share that grace, joy and love, following Jesus on your own pilgrim journey.

Acts 11.27 – 12.2

Psalm 126

2 Corinthians 4.7-15

Matthew 20.20-28