

2 Corinthians 4: 7 – 15; Matthew 20: 20 – 28

St James' Day

Today I am pleased to join you so that I can induct Judy Hunt as Rector of the newly formed Benefice that has come about as a result of some legal changes to the relationship between Whitchurch and the surrounding parishes. A new Benefice needs a new Rector and though Judy has already been licensed I have come to complete the process by inducting her.

As I do so, it seems appropriate to spend a few minutes reflecting on the work of a Priest and I want to base those reflections on the Apostle James whose Feast the Church celebrates today.

James was executed by King Herod and the tragic event is recorded in just two sentences in **Acts 12:1,2: '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.'**

I want to highlight 3 features of that summary of James' execution and connect them to the reasons why we value the work and witness of our priests.

The first is that James knew Jesus ...

We first come across James in the Gospels where he is one of the band of close followers of Jesus. In fact within that band James forms part of an 'inner cabinet' of three who accompany Jesus at special moments in his ministry. The 3 are James, his brother John, and Peter – so for instance when Jesus goes to the mountain top and is transfigured it is these 3 men who alone are present to witness this glimpse of Jesus' true glory as his face and clothes became radiant. On a number of occasions when Jesus is performing a miracle – like the raising of Jairus' daughter – it is just these three – James, John and Peter – who are alongside Jesus in the room.

One of the incidents recorded by the Gospels which we just heard involving James and John is where their mother came to Jess and asked if her sons might sit one at his right hand and one at his left hand in his Kingdom. Jesus responded with a question to the 2 brothers: **'Are you able to drink the cup I am about to drink?'** Here Jesus was referring to the painful death he would suffer on the cross. And the reply James and John give him is: **'We are able.'** This reflects the dedication that James evidently felt to Jesus – that he was prepared to face the conflict that lay ahead in Jerusalem and to suffer with him.

Putting that together with the close companionship James had enjoyed throughout the ministry of Jesus we can see that James was someone who **knew Jesus**. That was why he had been designated a church leader and apostle – because he could be relied upon to speak authentically about Jesus and point others to a relationship with Jesus.

And that must lie near the heart of every priest's work ...

A priest is a person who also knows Jesus and can help others know him.

Michael Ramsey, who had been Archbishop of Canterbury, was once asked by a Muslim student how long he had been a priest: **'50 years'** answered Ramsey. **'That's a very long friendship!'** exclaimed the student. The priest is a person who should know what it means to be a friend of Jesus – and how to nurture that friendship through prayer, worship, engagement with the Bible and pastoral care of people. And hopefully that friendship will prove infectious – people will say: **'I want what she/he has got'** – so that personal experience and personal example become an inspiration **PTO**

and encouragement to many others to explore what being a friend of Jesus – and thus a friend of God – might mean. So James **Knew** Jesus.

The second thing we learn about James is that he was the brother of John.

Like every other human being an essential feature of his identity was determined by relationship with others. In the Western World we have a distorted view of what it means to be human. We think of each individual as an isolated unit with little or no connection with other human beings. Each person has been viewed like a billiard ball just glancing off the outside of others. But in other parts of the world relationship is seen as essential to each person's identity. **John Mbitu, an African Theologian** summarises this by saying: *I am because we are* – we cannot be fully ourselves without acknowledging our debt to and connection with others. If Covid has taught us anything it has surely taught us that. We do need interaction. We are **inter**-dependent rather than **independent**. We are not made to exist alone and in isolation – and that we can and do affects each other.

But if relationships can be a blessing they can also be a curse. They can bring friction and frustration and hurt. There is a story about a man sitting in a boat afloat on the sea. He begins to drill into the bottom of the boat. **'Stop it'** say the others. **'Why?'** he asks, **'I am just doing my own thing!'** But of course his actions were putting everyone in peril. Relationships can damage and destroy and divide people. And when that happens there is a vital need for reconciliation and peace-making.

And that is at the very heart of the Christian message: that Christ came to reconcile us to one another – inspire us to love one another. Thus the priest as the representative of Christ is often engaged in the work of reconciliation and healing, of talking about forgiveness, about renewing communication and discovering new ways to work together and be in harmony. The Latin word for priest is **'pontifex'** and it means 'bridge-builder' – the person who connects with 2 sides of a divided situation and helps the parties to find ways to meet and understand one another.

Today it is often the challenge of accepting difference that causes major problems. I recently read an article by the journalist Christina Lamb. She wrote a clumsy sentence in her commentary on the Duke of Edinburgh's funeral. She said this: **'an often crotchety figure offending people with gaffes about slitty eyes, even if secretly we rather enjoyed this.'** Lamb claims that she was trying to say that what we enjoyed was the Duke's lack of diplomacy not the racist content of his remark. But it was badly worded. As a result she has received constant death threats aimed not just at her but also her family – and she has lived in fear and with sleepless nights ever since. Most of these came on Instagram and twitter. Even though she has apologised publicly over and over again the torrent of abuse has not abated and most of what people have said to her could not be quoted here.

I don't want to adjudicate on the wording she used but I do think this illustrates the very deep polarisation that so often marks contemporary life. People seem to be driven not just by anger – which in certain cases is justified – but by rage. Rage filled with vitriol and total inability to sympathise with the other party – rage that often lights a forest fire on social media and can lead to people being targeted, and alternative viewpoints completely disregarded. In such a situation the church needs to model a very different way of mutual respect and handling disagreement. As bridge builder the priest symbolises that more excellent way – and the community of the church needs to embody and enact the same spirit of reconciliation that is represented by its leaders.

Third and final feature that I want to highlight in connection with James' death is the broad description that comes in the 1st sentence: **Herod seized some 'who belonged to the church.'** That was first and foremost what made James a target of Herod's violence – that he belonged to the church.

And of course every priest, whilst a representative of Jesus Christ and an ambassador of God, is also someone whose life is bound up with the church. Priests act not just in an individual capacity but also in a corporate capacity – **(next page)**

what they say or do (or don't say, don't do) will bear directly on how people perceive the life of a church in a locality. This means that the priest needs to know how best to nurture the spiritual life of the congregations in his/her care but also how to make connections with those who position themselves far outside the boundaries of church life and activity. ***(Inside church – preside, preach, pastor ... outside like an ambassador commending faith).***

To do that effectively the priest needs to be familiar with the rich variety of Christian tradition. ...To know about different methods of prayer, to understand the significance of the sacraments, to be skilled in introducing people to the Bible and its great wisdom for living with God and with others. To achieve that the priest has to make time for study – to read and reflect and find out more of what is available from the past so that it can be passed on and be beneficial to the Church of today.

But alongside all that careful exploration and explanation of what it means to live as a Christian, the priest must also be able to 'read' the signs of the times. What is it that energizes people at the moment? What are the things that matter and generate passion and a demand for action? What constitute the main problems and pressures for people today that undermine their inner peace and fill them with anxiety and worry? And this must be so – not just for humanity in general but also for humanity in the locality. What is shaping the life of ***this*** community, this area that needs acknowledging? When the priest knows that then he/she may have a prophetic word that pierces into the lives of people round about.

Thus it was Karl Barth who said that every preacher needs to carry a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. **What is the good news?** and **What is the current news?** are the questions that should inspire a priest – and then how to make a connection between them, showing the relevance of our Christian faith. And what the priest does the whole congregation needs to do as well – linking the lives of friends and neighbours to the refreshing waters of the Gospel so they can drink freely from them.

So then, as we give thanks for James and for priests like Judy (Sue and Sam) we are reminded of 3 things that apply to them and apply to us all:

- 1. We are friends of Jesus – we know him and want others to know him.**
- 2. We are bridge-builders – people of peace who seek to create reconciliation where it is needed.**
- 3. We are those 'who belong to the church' and as such to quote Rowan Williams – '*the believability of the Gospel depends on us.*'**

It is a high calling for both priest and people – but those whom God calls, God also equips and empowers. And so as we contemplate our calling it takes us back to God's throne of grace where we seek the divine mercy and generosity and the power of the Holy Spirit.

It was a place that we can be sure that James knew – and which he had recourse to as he faced death at the hands of Herod's executioners.

Amen.