

THE FEAST OF ST JAMES THE APOSTLE

PREACHER : Canon Neil Thompson, Precentor

Sunday, July 25th 2010

10.30am
Rochester Cathedral

Ruth and I love summer living when you can eat out and enjoy the garden. In fact the garden becomes another room.

So when I accompanied the boy choristers and men on the recent choir tour to Malta, it was a real delight to have our final dinner on the last night sitting out in Independence Square in Victoria on Gozo.

And what a night it was. It was the start of the festival of St George of which the concerts of the International Music Festival were a part. This festival was only just warming up – it would last five intense days with a spill over in terms of lead in and hangover!

Now, St George is no mythical person out in Gozo – he is a big time player in the lives of Gozitans.

And George is not alone, for not only are the churches of Gozo and Malta teeming with paintings and statues of the saints but in mid-July, the streets of Victoria were peopled with really exotic Christians from the past – on wonderful pedestals in all the streets and squares.

Valletta too on Malta was similarly festooned with bunting, banners and a cloud of witnesses in the form of saints new and old adorning the streets and accompanying the resident shrines on street corners and niches throughout the city. Fireworks exploded day and night!

Yes, if you eat outside in Malta and Gozo you may well be brushing shoulders with the Zebedee twins, St James and St John, as well as dozens or even hundreds of others.

Rochester and Strood, Maidstone and Canterbury, London and Birmingham are quite other.

There's hardly a saint to be seen.

And I think that is rather sad.

The Reformation may well have brought many benefits and much needed changes but it has also brought about an impoverishment when it comes to the joy and social dimension of living the Christian faith.

All too much of our religion is about personal guilt, personal forgiveness and personal salvation.

We have lost a sense of the collective as in the days of Israel and replicated in the strong Jewish identification with family and community and which still reverberates in Christianity where the sun shines and the Church's celebrations are robust and real enough to spill out onto the pavement and into people's houses and everyday lives.

In our gospel passage we have a wonderful scene of human character and frailty.

Mrs Zebedee is trying her best to get her two boys assured top places in Jesus' kingdom.

It is a brilliant Jewish mother moment. The holiness that we read of in the Bible is that raw, ragged and vital. It is forged within all the foibles and trivia and prejudice of our everyday lives.

People are always the same.

Jesus called James and his brother John *boanerges*, sons of thunder; they may well have been more at home on Rochester High Street late on a Saturday night than in a niche or window of the cathedral here on a Sunday morning.

As British people we have missed the point of the saints; we see them as legendary, decorative, incredible and outlandish celebrities in God's other worldly creation.

And more often than not they come across as unattractively pious and goody goody!

No wonder we are bashful at talking with them and embracing them in a sense of continuity, prayer and common joy.

We have placed them on the wrong sort of pedestals.

They are, I think, much happier listening to us as we eat and drink, and dance and have fun.

On my bookshelves I used to have a copy of *Who's Who* for 1989. Someone who is in it gave me their throw out.

In the Preface it reads:

'An invitation to appear in *Who's Who* has, on occasion, been thought of as conferring distinction; that is the last thing it can do. It recognizes distinction and influence. The attitude of the present editorial board remains that of the editor of the 1897 edition, who stated in his preface that the book seeks to recognize people "whose prominence is inherited, or depending upon office, or the result of ability which singles them out from their fellows in occupations open to every educated man or woman".'

So, would James the Apostle have made it into the *Who's Who* equivalent of his day?

Indeed, do you think Jesus, God incarnate, would get a mention?

I am certain that we all know the answer.

In fact it may well have been that James and his brother John, both successful Galilean fisherman were actually rather well connected in Jewish society.

They were also among the first to be called by Jesus and with Simon Peter, they witnessed the Transfiguration, heard Jesus' prophecy as he looked over Jerusalem and were taken apart by Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane to be near him in his agony.

But none of this prevents them from behaving badly!

St Paul in the passage to the church at Corinth reminds us that the treasure of God's power within us belongs to him not us and is carried through this life in jars of clay.

Unsurprisingly, James and John want to sit at Jesus' right hand and his left in his glory.

They saw the Master at his transfiguration with Moses and Elijah – they now want to book their places and be sure they're the best.

In fact, here in St Matthew's Gospel it's James and John's mother who goes up to Jesus to beg the favour for her boys.

And Jesus' reply is powerful and enigmatic – and it starts with another question: are they able to share in his sufferings by drinking the cup he is about to drink?

When they say that they are, then Jesus detaches rewards and glory from the experience of faithfulness and love.

He says clearly that it is not he who rewards people in the kingdom.

In God's light and life, humility and glory go together.

We may yearn for status and a sense of importance but Jesus and the scriptures suggest to us that the divine order is so different as to be unrecognisable by our standards and values.

And there is more.

Dr Colin Morris, former President of the Methodist Conference says that the Gospel cannot be preached by the strong to the weak.

That is some challenge: the Gospel cannot be preached by the strong to the weak.

To take that further, he meant that even if the words and deeds are Gospel words and deeds, their force may be neutralised, and perhaps even contradicted, by the fact that they come from someone standing by the side of power, not by the side of weakness.

If this is true, and Jesus seems to say this to James and his brother John, then churches need to be weak.

And to take Dr Morris' point yet further, perhaps the strong can only hear the Gospel if it is preached by the weak.

Status and power are dangerous and potentially destructive of true spiritual strength.

So although we are numerically small and Christians are now a minority in this land, we are nevertheless given an authentic and holy voice.

But, how do we use it?

How do we risk our limitations and vulnerability in the risk and adventure of reaching and speaking out to the powerful and the weak around us?

In the St Matthew lesson, Jesus goes on to tell all his disciples that he is setting a pattern of slavery and glory, for he has come to serve not to be served.

This is a dynamic and a motivation that is divine and breaks the mould of earthly rule and subjection.

It is revolutionary. It is dangerous.

It may even be thought to be seditious and treasonable.

It was for St James.

Our first reading from the Acts records the martyrdom of James in Antioch.

Antioch boasted a population of 800,000 and was a prominent commercial city noted for its blatant paganism.

Here, James is Herod Agrippa's first victim, and the first apostle martyr.

This was the execution, under Roman practice, of a political troublemaker.

James truly was a Son of Thunder and had learnt bravely that to be on the right hand or the left hand of Jesus in glory, was to experience something of the pain and ignominy of Calvary.

It is a far cry from *Who's Who*.

And such truth must change our lives and our prayers.

We must speak out for the weak in the world of today and ensure that the church is conformed in weakness to the love of God.

It is not enough to pray for Afghanistan, Zimbabwe, Somalia and Darfur if we are unprepared to change and brave the cost.

And our prayers should naturally include the saints just as their prayers are vital to our sense of community and fellowship.

We are not on our own.

The Christian call is not singular and our salvation is not individual.

We are caught up by God's love into his three-person society and called to live with joy in the fellowship of all the saints.

May this be a cause of celebration and may our lives here in worship spill out in joyful and infectious spirit into our everyday lives and the world around us.

So light a candle this day, raise a glass and ask St James to pray for us!

Amen.