

St James' Church, Wulfstan Way, Cambridge
Sunday 21st July 2013 Celebrating the Feast of St James the Apostle
Readings: Acts 11:27-12:2; 2 Corinthians 4:7-15; Matthew 20:20-28.

Some Drink! Some Community!

Professor David F. Ford

'Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?' says Jesus to James, after whom this Church is named, and to John his brother. They answered: **'We are able'**. (Matthew 20:22) For James what that meant has been told in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles: **'Herod had James, the brother of John, killed by the sword.'** (Acts 12:2) That was some drink! And when we in a few minutes drink the Holy Communion wine as the blood of Jesus we are fully part of the same drinking community. For us in St James' Church, celebrating James as our special saint, this is a day when it is right to ask: *What does he mean to each of us? And what does he mean for us as a church community?*

Think of the life of James. By the way, note that he is not the same as James the brother of Jesus, who became leader of the Church in Jerusalem and to whom the Epistle of James in the New Testament is ascribed; nor is he James the son of Alphaeus, who was also one of the twelve apostles. Our James the apostle was a fisherman in a family business, and one day he was fishing with his brother John and his father Zebedee when Jesus called him and John. And **'immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.'** (Matthew 4:22) I am sure that the main thing James would say to each of us would be: Listen to Jesus! Follow Jesus! Trust your life to Jesus! Jesus became utterly central to his life from then on. He walked and stayed with him; he listened to his teaching and arguing; he saw his healings; and he was present with Peter and John at Jesus' transfiguration when Jesus' face shone like the sun as he talked with Moses and Elijah about his own Exodus to Jerusalem to die, and the voice of his Father said: **'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!'** (Matthew 17:5)

It was on the way to Jerusalem that the incident we heard about in our Gospel reading happened. James' mother was pushy and ambitious for her sons, and she even pushed Jesus. She knelt down in front of Jesus and 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.'** (Matthew 20:21) If only she knew: this king was soon to be on a cross, and to be on his right and left meant being crucified. Beware of what you push for!

Jesus takes the opportunity to share two basic truths.

First, there is that drink. When Jesus got to Jerusalem at the last supper he took the cup and said: **'Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'** (Matthew 26:28). Then he went to the Garden of Gethsemane, where **'he threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.'** (Matthew 26:39)

Drinking this cup is about utterly trusting that going God's way with Jesus means a future of full, abundant life and love, no matter what happens – even death does not have the last word. God does. God's word is life, forgiveness, love and joy. And Jesus is God's word in person.

Second, there is a fundamental lesson for us as a Christian community. Jesus says that in the world power is exercised top down, and the high-ups lord it over the rest. **'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 as a ransom for many.'** (Matthew 20:26-28) In the Gospel of John's account Jesus acts this out by washing the feet of his disciples, which was a slave's work. James had his feet washed by Jesus and went on to be a servant leader of the Church, and to give his life.

Loving, sacrificial service: that is not the most popular thing in our society, but we are called to it. That is our vocation as a community, among ourselves and to all in need. We do not do it by ourselves or in our own strength. When Jesus was arrested in Gethsemane James ran away. But later in the upper room, when the resurrected Jesus appeared to James and the other disciples who had abandoned him a few days earlier, he said: **'As the Father has sent me so I send you'** – an astonishing calling that we all share in, and it is immediately followed by the secret of fulfilling it: **'When he said this he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit..."** So James, who had run away, went on to teach and preach confidently and to build up the Church so effectively that Herod had to eliminate him by having him killed.

What about us in St James' Church? We too, in all our weakness and inadequacy and littleness, as well as in our strength and abilities, have received the Holy Spirit; and we are told simply to ask and we will be given always, daily, this Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit of God Himself. *Come, Holy Spirit!* is a prayer God always answers, sometimes in surprising ways. The most important mark of the Spirit's inspiration is the love that welcomes, serves and befriends others. *This is our vocation of love: to be friends of Jesus, friends of each other, and particularly friends of those in our society and world who are little, marginalized, ignored, weaker, poorer, less healthy, less successful, less respected, less able.* The extraordinary truth about the Church at its best is that we are a community of the weaker and stronger together, but one in which it is not our weakness or our strength that matters most: it is the love among us that matters.

That is why it is so deeply right that today we are dedicating a window in memory of Rowena Peale, a faithful member of our congregation who was blind.

We are a congregation with all sorts of abilities and disabilities, better-off and less well-off, more and less powerful in worldly terms, more or less successful in the world's eyes. But what about in God's eyes? The window prays: 'Enable with perpetual light the dullness of our blinded sight'. To see in the perpetual light of God is to see each other as precious children of God, as made in God's image and utterly loved by God, as the friends of Jesus and therefore our friends. The light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus (2 Corinthians 4:6) shines on all of us in love, and can heal our blinded sight. Each

of us is someone God delights in loving. We are loved therefore we love, and we see each other with the eyes of love.

Last month I had a most moving time in Dublin. I was there with my best friend Micheal O'Siadhail [pronounced Mee-hawl Oh Sheel] at the bedside of his wife Bríd in hospital when she died. She had been a headmistress who over twenty years ago was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. She later had to give up teaching, and eventually Micheal could not cope at home, so she went into a care home, and by the time of her death was almost completely dependent on the nursing staff. So much about her was remarkable – for more of the story, and a lovely portrait of Bríd, go to Micheal's website <http://osiadhail.com/news/>; but for now the main thing is the way she in her weakness was at the heart of a community where weakness and strength came together in love.

There were three interwoven strands in it. The first was that of those friends and relatives who visited her regularly. Bríd had not seen nearly as much of them before she went into care, but now they got far closer. And it was completely mutual – many have said that they always came out feeling the better for being with her, and she herself was greatly encouraged by the visits. The second was the care home, a worship-centred community of residents, staff and nuns which welcomed not only her but also Micheal, who became with Bríd fully part of its worshipping life. And there was also her marriage to Micheal. I saw their love deepen and intensify as Bríd got weaker.

In each of these aspects of her community what mattered most was not whether the members of it were categorized as weaker or stronger; what really mattered was loving and being loved - whether as a headmistress or as a completely dependent Parkinson's sufferer. God delights in blessing those communities that especially honour and delight in those of his children who are little, vulnerable, fragile, elderly, weak, disabled or blind.

Paul in our reading from 2 Corinthians gives a wonderful picture of weakness and strength together: **'... afflicted ... not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ... struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.'** (2 Corinthians 4:8-10) As he says, whatever treasure we have is **'in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.'** (2 Corinthians 4:7) In our baptism we have all been identified and embraced by that death and that life. St James invites us today to rededicate ourselves to follow Jesus together here in Cambridge, to drink the cup of blessing together, and to be a community of deeper and wider and wiser love. I myself am deeply grateful that in the past year I have been welcomed by you as a member of this congregation. It is a great privilege and a joy. Thank you.

Finally, at the heart of our life together in the Church is our worship, this amazing reality and privilege of coming together into God's presence week after week, adoring the God of love. As Paul says, speaking of 'grace', one of his favourite words for pointing to the love of God: **'Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God'**. (2 Corinthians 4:15) Amen. Alleluia!