

Sermon for Sunday, July 26, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Today we celebrate
our patronal festival,
the feast day of the saint for whom this church is named,
St James.

But do you know
who St James was?

There are a number of people in the New Testament called James,
but the one we celebrate today
is James the son of Zebedee,
James the greater
as he is known.

We first come across him
by the Sea of Galilee
where he is busy fishing with his brother John.

The way the gospel of Mark tells it,
Jesus was walking along the shore, when he saw two men
throwing a net into the lake,
and he called to them,

“Follow me
and I will make you fish for people.”

And they dropped their nets
and went with him.

That was Simon, who Jesus nicknamed Peter, the rock,
and his brother Andrew.

And Jesus, now with the two brothers,
continued walking.

And a little later
he came across two more fishermen,
this time
sitting in their boat
with their father Zebedee and a couple of employees,
doing repairs to their nets.

Jesus called to them,
and they got up,
and went with him too.

That was James,
along with his brother John.

Over time,
James, along with John and Simon Peter
became the most trusted friends of Jesus.
Early on
they witnessed the healing of Peter's mother-in-law;
later they were there
for the raising of Jairus' daughter.
Jesus invited only those three among his disciples
to come up the mountain with him
when he was transfigured,
and to watch and pray with him
in the garden of Gethsemane.

Though they weren't perfect.
We all know the story
of how Peter denied knowing Jesus three times.
James and John
had their issues too.

Jesus nicknamed James and John
the sons of thunder,
suggesting
that they were perhaps a little
hot-headed.
One time
Jesus and his disciples
were refused hospitality in a village -
a great insult in that culture -
and James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven on the offenders.
And then there was the story we read today,
when they went with their mother to talk with Jesus
and she asked
if they could have the places of highest honor,
sitting beside him
when he finally came to rule.
And when he said
that they would have to share in his cup,

that is
in everything that it would mean
for him to rule,
they said “Of course we will!”
not realising
that the cup they would share
is the cup
of suffering.

And that’s what happened to James.
About ten years
after Jesus was crucified,
just before Passover,
King Herod Agrippa I
decided he didn’t like these Christians.
He was the grandson of Herod the Great,
who tried to kill Jesus when he was a baby,
and the nephew of Herod Antipas,
who killed John the Baptist
and tried Jesus
on Good Friday.
Herod Agrippa I
attacked some of the first Christians
and put James to death
with a sword,
the first of the twelve apostles
to be martyred,
and the only one of them
whose death is recorded
in the New Testament.

And then there are the legends of James,
that he made a missionary journey to Spain,
and that after his death
his body was taken there and buried at Compostela.
And one legend
is that as the boat carrying his body neared Spain,
a huge storm hit
and his body was washed away.
Eventually it washed upon the beach

covered with scallop shells.

That's the story of James.

A story of someone who was not perfect

but was faithful to Christ

to the end,

and who continues to be an inspiration and an example to us

of what it means

to live faithfully as a follower of Jesus.

And that makes it particularly appropriate

that today, on the feast of St James,

we celebrate the sacrament of baptism,

marking the beginning of the faith journey

of little Genevieve.

Sometimes

when we celebrate baptism

we rush through

what are perhaps the most important responses

in the whole sacrament.

Most of the emphasis

is on the baptismal covenant

which tries to explore

what it means to live as a Christian.

But it is the questions that come early on

that are most important,

the questions that are, in effect,

the equivalent of the vows at a wedding,

the questions

the questions

that the parents and godparents

answer on behalf of the child to be baptized

until she is of age

to make that commitment

for herself.

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior?

Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?

Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?

Do you hear the echoes
of the words Jesus spoke
to Simon Peter and Andrew,
James and John,
by the sea of Galilee?
“Follow me...?”

Because that is what the Christian life is all about,
not just keeping a list of rules and regulations,
but following Jesus - wherever he leads us.

Think about that
for a moment.
Following Jesus...

This week
I had the privilege and joy
of going to see the band U2 at Madison Square Garden.
who are currently on tour.
One of the things I love about U2
apart from the music itself
is that so many of their lyrics
draw on Scripture.
And they draw on Scripture in a way
that helps me think
about how I live my faith.
This concert, fairly early on,
they sang the song, “I will follow.”
It’s one of their earliest songs,
dating back to their first album release in 1980.
In 2006, Bono described the song this way,
"It's a song about unconditional love, which is what a mother has for her child. If you
walk away, I will follow. No matter what you do, you cannot separate yourself from my
love. Which echoes the scriptures: 'nor from the love of God.'" - Bono, U2 By U2 2006
And the refrain goes like this:
“If you walk away, walk away
I walk away, walk away
I will follow”

A mother follows her child. God follows us.
And we
follow Christ.

Of course, following Christ
isn't always easy.
It's something we often struggle with.
That's why those questions about turning to Christ
and following him
are preceded by questions about turning away from evil.
Because there is always a gap
between who we want to be
and how we want to live
and what we actually manage.

A few minutes after "I will follow",
U2 sang from their most recent album,
"Song for Someone."

"If there is a light
You can't always see
And there is a world
We can't always be
If there is a dark
That we shouldn't doubt
And there is a light
Don't let it go out"

It captures that gap
between who we want to be
and what we actually manage,
between the passionate commitment to Christ of those questions
and the reality of trying to live it out
in our daily lives.

In our cemetery
there is a sculpture
of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer.
He was one of three leaders of the church in England

during the Reformation;
in 1553, after the Roman Catholic Queen Mary ascended to the throne,
he, along with Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer,
was arrested and condemned for treason.

The following year,
the Privy Council demanded that the three be tried for heresy.

Cranmer
denied any treachery, disobedience, or heresy,
and recanted his Reformed faith.

Ridley and Latimer
were burned at the stake.

And it is reported
that Latimer said, as he was about to be burned,
“Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man! We shall this day light such a
candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out.”

Six months later,
Cranmer, who had watched his friends die,
followed their example.
He renounced his recantations,
and was also
burned.

A gloomy story for such a celebratory day?
Perhaps,
but it is also a story of those in our tradition,
who like James
followed Jesus
the best they could.
Sometimes
lighting the candle of faith;
sometimes
struggling
merely not
to let it go out.

Today, after she is baptised,
we will give Genevieve a candle.

It's a reminder of Jesus' words

in the sermon on the Mount:

“You are the light of the world. . . .No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

In baptism,
Genevieve
will be marked as belonging to God.
And she will be invited, commissioned,
to shine with the light of that candle of faith,
and not let it
go out.

As we have all been invited and commissioned.
To live as lights, as candle flames in the world,
and to make sure
that candle flame of faith in Christ
does not go out.

As James did,
and Ridley and Latimer and Cranmer.
It probably won't cost us
or little Genevieve
our lives.
Not through martyrdom, anyway...
but perhaps through life,
dedicating our lives
to following Jesus,
loving and serving God
as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord,
burning with the light
of our savior
Jesus Christ.