

I have never preached on the apostle James before. Today happens to be the Feast of St James, I would like to dedicate this sermon to our Warden and Treasurer in appreciation of what he has done for me personally and for the parish, especially during this entire pandemic period. It happens he is also called James. He may not agree with what I say at all, but I still want to express my utmost gratitude.

Among the original twelve apostles of Jesus, apart from the apostate and betrayer Judas Iscariot, only the death of James, the elder brother of John, was recorded rather briefly in the New Testament, 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.* Hence, the church rightly celebrates the feast day of St James, designating him Apostle and Martyr.

The episode we have in today's gospel reading, James boldly replied to Jesus' question that he was able to drink the cup which Jesus was about to drink at Jerusalem. He misunderstood the cup meant for glory and not for suffering. Then Jesus prophesied that James would indeed drink the cup of suffering. Little did James know Jesus was referring to his death. Try to imagine when King Herod killed James, the time between Jesus' prophecy and his martyrdom would not be that long. James would surely have remembered Jesus' saying of him drinking the cup. To celebrate the feast day of St. James without mentioning Jesus' prophecy and the actual death, we'll have no idea why he is designated as a martyr.

St Luke simply records the event of his death, killed by the cruel Herod. Why is it a martyrdom? Modern folks may say, it is bad luck that James fell into the hands of the cruel king. The church begs the difference.

Let us put ourselves into the shoes of James and see how he would have regarded his own death. At first, he would have admitted he was wrong in thinking of the cup in terms of glory. But having witnessed Jesus' own death and resurrection his whole thinking would have changed quite drastically. Now, Jesus' initial calling him at the Lake of Galilee and the subsequent saying, 'Take up your cross and follow me' takes on a new dimension. When death comes head on, the words of Jesus' saying of drinking the cup would naturally occur in his mind, wouldn't it? He comes to realize that to identify himself with Jesus involves an inevitable death. After all he has already made a bold declaration: *We are able.* Without going through death he is in no way belonging to Jesus. One may ask, can anyone really accept the cup of suffering as James did? Perhaps James would echo with the apostle Paul's words in today's epistle reading: *'We have this treasure in earthenware vessels that the overflowing of power may be seen to be God's, not ours.'* Overflowing power, because what it shows in his death, as much as in Jesus' own death, is not natural and yet a reality the church must always witness and exhibits to the world.

James faced his death valiantly and died as a martyr but not individually. The apostle Peter with Jesus' accreditation is to become the rock of the church on earth. However, James' death stands for the suffering of the church. Luke says: *King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church*. We often forget the church is a suffering community, engaged in conflict with the principalities and powers that Christ has overcome on the cross. The word martyrdom rightly belongs to the church. The church cannot be anything but a martyr-community. The words of Revelation 20:4 *'beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God'* is fulfilled in James. But what about us ordinary faithful, who would perhaps never encounter martyrdom? I think St Luke and John of Patmos understand, the martyrs stand for the whole church.

Let us explore further of the meaning of martyrdom. Martyrdom does not simply mean dying for one's faith. Well said by a renowned theologian: *Martyrdom is simply the focal point of a conflict engaged through every variety of endurance*. To the point one may equate martyrdom with Christian suffering, it does not simply mean the pressure that a secular society exerts on the church by harassment, threat and violence. It also stands for a wider range of difficulties, such as the apostle's worries over the welfare of the church and the frustrations of physical weakness and mortality. Furthermore, trial and temptation suggest conflict in the soul. Jesus' temptations in the wilderness is in fact his suffering of body, soul and spirit. The overflowing power the church possesses is the authority conferred upon the suffering church to overcome resistance to God's saving will by enduring suffering in whatever form.

Most of us might not have thought of the efficacy of one's suffering. The suffering of Christians in the church is, like Jesus' own suffering, vicarious. That is to say, suffering is with and for the community for the benefit of others. The apostles suffer in order to hold out to the world the sufferings of Christ which were undertaken for the world. Suffering is not a contingent circumstance of the apostolic work; it is a part of the apostolic mission, demonstrating the validity of the apostolic message. The apostle James, in taking his place with Christ upon the Cross, proclaims the cross as the answer to the need of redemption. James fulfills Paul's words: *always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies (4.10)*. In his own death, James proclaims to the world: *So death is at work in us, but life in you*.

Lastly the suffering of the church imitates the suffering of Christ in its double representation of the righteous God and the sinful humankind. The primary meaning of the word martyrdom is 'witness'. The church understands its suffering as a witness both to the righteousness of God and to the sin of the world. The church, like Christ, suffered innocently but in identification with sinners. At this pandemic

time, the Christian church must make it loud and clear to the world, we stand side by side with everyone: we Christians are not exempted from the danger of the virus. We suffer as much as the rest of the world. The gospel message will be invalidated if we claim, as some do naively claim: We are well protected by God, the virus will not attack us because we believe in the almighty protection of God.

Nowhere is the sign that marks the suffering church more than the Eucharist. St John's Gordon prides itself a liturgical church, celebrating Eucharist in regular Sunday services. It is most abhorrent when people come to Holy Communion treating it as an individual act of piety. No, when you and I and the rest of the church come to Eucharist, we all become James, boldly responding to Jesus' words: *Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?* "We are able." By sharing the one bread and one cup together we identify ourselves with the suffering of Jesus on the Cross.

We have no clue when this pandemic will end, some predict it will stay forever with us, like flu. Some hold a rather pessimistic view of the future with the onslaught of the covid. The church seems to be entering into an uncharted water. When St Luke recorded James' martyrdom, the church was indeed in danger of being wiped out. But do you know the last two words of his book in Acts? *Boldness and unhindered*. That is one of the true characters of Church on earth. We are bold in facing suffering, even in the midst of death and the gospel work will never be hindered come what may.