

Sermon: Discipleship James-style

Patronal

One of the gifts of a patronal festival is that it allows us to pause and either remind ourselves, or perhaps discover afresh, something of the saint whose name shapes and honours our church. In this parish we are doubly blessed: not only do we have two churches, but they bear the names of two brothers — John and James — both central to the life of the early Church and to the witness that followed Jesus' ascension.

Yet James and John are not identical figures. Their personalities, their journeys, and their discipleship each have their own distinct forms. Today, as we keep the feast of St James, we have an ideal opportunity to reflect on *his* life — on the character of his discipleship, the ways he learned, sometimes faltered, and grew — and to ask what his example might teach us about following Jesus with faithfulness and eagerness.

Making mistakes

One of the first things James teaches us about discipleship is the simple truth that following Jesus involves making mistakes — and learning from them. When we look at James's record, we notice that he is rebuked by Jesus on several occasions. There is that moment in the Samaritan village when the hospitality is poor, and James, with John, asks whether they might call down fire from heaven to destroy it. Jesus stops them firmly, and with a touch of humour gives them the nickname *Boanerges* — “sons of thunder”.

James is also present in Gethsemane, entrusted with the task of watching and praying, yet he falls asleep and receives another rebuke. And in today's Gospel, it is clear that he still has not grasped Jesus' teaching on status and greatness. He seeks honour, but Jesus reminds him that true discipleship is shaped by

service, not by power — by the posture of a servant, not the privilege of a master.

Yet despite these missteps, James is not dismissed. He remains close to Jesus, continues to learn, and is entrusted with the calling of an apostle — one sent out to embody and proclaim the gospel. Much of what he learned came through getting things wrong.

And perhaps that is a quiet encouragement for us. If we never make mistakes, it may be a sign that we are not actually doing very much. Discipleship in our own context involves stepping out — entering a conversation at work, taking up a role of advocacy, offering help where it is needed — all of which carry the possibility of getting things wrong. But it is often through those very moments that we grow, and learn, and deepen our following of Christ.

Costly

Another aspect of James's discipleship is its cost. Following Jesus did not simply fall into his lap; it required real change, real sacrifice, and a willingness to step into an unknown future. When James and his brother John were called, they left their family, their livelihood, and the security of the fishing trade. In their world, such a decision was seen as scandalous and irresponsible — a break with family duty and communal expectation. Yet they chose to follow Jesus, not knowing where that path would lead.

And in today's reading from Acts, we see where it did lead, at least in earthly terms. Around ten years after the resurrection, James is put to death by Herod Agrippa. Jerusalem was under intense pressure: Herod was courting favour with the religious authorities, presenting himself as a guardian of Jewish identity, while the Christian movement — growing, welcoming Gentiles, and reshaping boundaries — was viewed with suspicion. James's execution was not random; it was a calculated act of political

display. For the Church, it was a moment of deep shock: the first apostle to be martyred, a sign that persecution had reached the very heart of its leadership.

Yet Jesus had prepared James for this. In the Gospel, when James and John ask for places of honour, Jesus asks them, “*Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?*” They reply, “*We are able.*” And in the end, they were. James’s discipleship was costly, but it was faithful.

For us, following Jesus beyond the basics — important as they are — will also involve cost. It may mean re-ordering our priorities, stretching our comfort, or taking on responsibilities that carry risk. For some Christians across the world, it still means danger to health or life itself. The charity Open Doors bears witness to this reality, and I’ve linked a short video on the parish website for those who wish to reflect further.

<https://youtu.be/quKdSNZwoNI?si=2dFP4oTsISkDCNhQ>

But perhaps the deeper truth is this: a life of faith without cost is usually a life without growth. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “*When Christ calls a person, he bids them come and die*” — not necessarily in the literal sense, but in the sense of letting go of safety, stepping beyond the familiar, and discovering the larger life God has for us. It is often only when we risk something for Christ that we discover how much Christ can do in us.

Trust

Whatever embarrassment may come from making mistakes, and whatever cost discipleship may carry, James’s life shows us that the great reward of following Jesus is the trust God places in those who offer themselves wholeheartedly. For all his missteps, James

is drawn into the most intimate moments of Jesus' ministry — moments entrusted only to the inner circle.

He is present in the house of Jairus when Jesus raises the little girl, witnessing life restored in a quiet room where only a few were allowed. He is in Gethsemane, just a few paces from Jesus, close enough to hear those final prayers of anguish and surrender. Jesus wanted him near, just as we want those we trust most beside us in our darkest hours. And James is there on the mountain of Transfiguration, seeing a glimpse of Christ's glory — a foreshadowing of the resurrection, revealed only to Peter, James, and John.

A life of committed, costly, risk-taking discipleship opens us to a deeper knowledge of God. In a world that is often material, self-absorbed, and unimaginative, those who walk closely with Christ sometimes find the veil lifted — moments of grace, insight, and encounter that reveal more of who God is. James lived such a life: present at these sacred moments, present at Pentecost, and present in the mission that followed. His faithfulness allowed God to entrust him with more than he could ever have imagined.

For us

So what can we, the people of Shirley Parish, draw from James' example on this patronal day?

Firstly this – we are intended to 'do' discipleship together, as a church, as a parish, as the body of Christ here.

But also this: that discipleship is not a matter of perfection, but of willingness. James made mistakes, he bore real cost, and he walked a path that demanded courage. Yet through all of it, he stayed close to Jesus — learning, growing, and becoming the person Christ saw in him long before he saw it in himself.

And when someone lives like that — honestly, humbly, and with a readiness to step out in faith — God entrusts them with more. James found himself drawn into moments of revelation, moments of intimacy, moments where the veil between earth and heaven seemed very thin indeed. Not because he was flawless, but because he was faithful.

For us, the invitation is the same. To follow Christ with enough courage to risk something; with enough humility to learn from our mistakes; and with enough trust to believe that God can do more in us than we imagine. When we walk that path, God reveals more of his life, his grace, and his purpose. And that, perhaps, is the heart of discipleship: not that we achieve great things, but that we allow *Christ* to achieve great things in and through us. Amen.

Rev'd Richard Haynes 26 July 2026 Feast of James the Apostle (moved)