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## St James the Apostle ('the Great')

Matt. 20:20-28

Acts 11:27-12:2

2 Cor. 4:7-15

Psalm 126

Purpose: To encourage costly self-giving for the sake of the gospel.

Sermon:

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

### ***We have this treasure in clay jars***

The trouble with this statement from St Paul is that, if we are honest, we generally don't believe it. First, we don't really believe that we are like 'clay jars'. And secondly, we struggle to believe that, in the gospel, we actually have a 'treasure'.

Both of these difficulties arise from our ideas about what is valuable; ideas that today's readings ask us to question. We like to talk about the sanctity of life. And it's true. Life is valuable. We love to believe - in the words of the L'Oreal adverts - that 'we're worth it'. And you *are* valuable; in more ways than you think!

The mother of James and John thought that her sons were special. So much so that she asks Jesus to give them the places of honour at his left and right for all eternity. But Jesus shows her that she has missed the point. What will be honoured for all eternity is not necessarily the same as what is honoured and valued here and now.

Let's think about this term 'clay jars' again. I think this is emphatically not a dualistic reference to bodies as opposed to souls. The 'afflictions' St Paul describes are spiritual, mental, and emotional, as well as physical. Rather, it refers to us as whole people, made in the image of God. In our very existence: spirit and body; mind and soul; however you choose to describe the human being...

So we are, in some important way, comparable to clay vessels. But how exactly? Perhaps it is because jars are created, just as we are created by God. After all, God is compared to a potter in Jeremiah and elsewhere in the Bible. Or perhaps it is because clay is fragile, just as we are weak and fallen.

But I think what St Paul is driving at here is something even more basic. It has to do with what a jar is *for*. And a 'jar' is a kind of container. A container is made for a purpose. It is valued for its ability to receive, to preserve, and to pass things on for future use. A jar does not exist for its own sake. Neither do we.

As St Paul tells the Corinthians, everything he does 'is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God' (2

Cor. 4:15). In the same way, in today's gospel, Jesus tells the mother of James and John that her sons do not exist for their own sake either. Their eternal honour is not a worthwhile end in itself. Rather, their lives derive meaning and value from costly self-giving.

I am reluctant to use the word 'sacrifice', here. It has lots of negative connotations, for good and bad reasons. It has been used to coerce men to go to war, to oblige women into positions of subservience, and to ride rough-shod over people's legitimate desires and consciences. But look how Jesus describes the gift of oneself as a choice, a freely-willed act; to 'drink the cup' that he himself drank from. Jesus asks the mother of James and John if her sons are aware of the true cost of discipleship; to give of oneself, at great personal cost, for the sake of something even more valuable.

This is not simply a case of indiscriminate self-giving, such as a martyrdom complex or succumbing without a fight to the evil that is in the world. I am not advocating death at the stake for anyone! Rather, it is often in the little things that the giving of oneself is costliest.

In taking time to listen to a neighbour or a colleague  
In spending a bit more money, so that you can support a local shop or a fair-trade producer  
In giving up your seat or your place in the queue  
In responding graciously when you are crossed, or slighted, or criticised

Each of these responses flows from what Jesus did, 'for us and for our salvation'. In the words of the Nicene Creed, he died 'for our sake' (*Common Worship, Order One*, p. 173). And the more we think about it, the clearer it becomes that this costly giving of ourselves forms the very DNA of the gospel. Jesus says: 'those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it' (Matthew 16:25).

Or (in John's gospel): 'unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit' (John 12:24). Only because life is valuable are we able to say that what we live for, or give our lives for is even more valuable.

And so we come back to the 'treasure' that St Paul talks about.

This week, I was sitting in a café when two girls came in with a camera. They were doing a project which involved asking people what they live for. And they wanted us to be specific. Rather than saying 'family', for example, they wanted people to say 'for my mother', or 'for my husband, or wife, or children'. I wonder how you would answer that question?

St Paul makes it clear that he is willing to suffer persecution and loss for the sake of 'the gospel of the glory of Christ' (2 Cor. 4:4). He explains again and again throughout this letter that: 'we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake' (v. 5).

It was for our sake that Jesus gave his life. It was for Jesus' sake that St Paul suffered. And in the end it was only for Jesus' sake that St James made his costly choice. He continued to worship and preach the risen Christ even at the risk of persecution. We read in Acts how Herod 'laid violent hands upon [him]' and had James 'killed with the sword' (Acts 12:1-2).

And so today the Church remembers St James the Apostle as a martyr. Jesus was right when he said: 'You will indeed drink my cup' (Matt. 20:23).

So in a way, James' mother also got what she wanted. Her son is known as St James 'the Great'. He is commemorated in no less a place than Santiago de Compostela, where over a hundred thousand pilgrims flock every year, also at great personal cost. But even these accolades, great though they are, are as nothing compared to the eternal pleasure of God. God sees each costly act of self-giving for the sake of the gospel, and makes it fruitful.

St Paul even seems to say that the cost of our self-giving reveals our human weakness, and that this is somehow necessary 'to the proper conveyance of the treasure of the gospel'. It is precisely because the 'extraordinary power' of the gospel comes from God and not from us' (2 Cor. 4:7b) that the psalmist can say: 'those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves' (Ps. 126:6). Life must be given away. The seed must be sown. Only what is given away can be received back again, its true value finally revealed. Only the grain that dies can produce a harvest.

So as we go out today, truly treasuring the gospel and believing that we really are the frail pottery into which God has chosen to commit this treasure. 'May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy' (Ps. 126:5). Amen.