

St. James.

Sunday 25 July 2021.

“Whoever must be first among you must be the slave of all” Mark. 10.44.

St. James.

We are in Northern Spain and it is hot. This is the pilgrimage centre of Santiago de Compostella and the place is humming with tourists and pilgrims. Every day there is a mass at noon in the cathedral to cater for the thousands of pilgrims who follow the Camino pilgrim trail which ends here where the bones of St. James are reputed to be held.

The mass in the cathedral is crowded: standing room only. All manner of pilgrims and tourists are there. Crowd control rather than serenity seems to be the priority of the stewards. The music is presented by a nun with an excellent voice and she is supported by a number of clerics who preside at the eucharist. Not everyone receives Communion though it is offered to all. At the end, the crowd melt away but a large number linger and make their way up to the High Altar where the bones of St. James are enshrined. A set of rickety steps behind the altar carries these ardent pilgrims up to the top where the casket of bones is held. If you lean over the balustrade, you can just touch the casket from behind. This must be the climax of a long 400-mile journey for some of these pilgrims. They meet James not face-to-face but approach from behind.

That is perhaps the best way to approach this particular saint who wasn't the most attractive of people. You will remember that Jesus called him and his brother John from their fishing boat which they owned with their father. That suggests that they were quite well off: employers indeed. Perhaps they were inclined to arrogance. In this reading from St. Mark the brothers sidle up to Jesus and ask for preferential treatment which really annoys the other disciples! St. Matthew tells the story differently. In his gospel it is their mother that asks for preferential treatment for her sons, to spare the reputation of the disciples. But Mark is blunt. He tells it as it is. They have an arrogance about them which is best avoided – approached from behind.

They were also hot-headed, argumentative so Jesus calls them 'sons of thunder'. James and his brother were tricky members of the apostolic band – not quite the polished saints that we might expect from the title.

Yes, they were best approached from behind but they were clearly and even obstinately facing in the direction of Jesus.

Wardens.

James was dedicated to Jesus. It bought its privileges; it did not erase his weaknesses but he goes down in Christian history as a faithful follower from whom others found inspiration for their faith.

We all need that sort of encouragement in our faith but where do we look? You may find inspiration from the scriptures. That is an obvious place to look and you would not be disappointed but it is not my first port of call. I need role models. Biographies are useful; historical figures can inspire but our wardens must not be overlooked. I really find them inspirational, even at their most irritating! Of course, they are not perfect. Like clergy, they are drawn from the ranks of ordinary church-goers but for whatever reason, they have shouldered responsibility for our churches. They are pillars, not buttresses. We have many faithful buttresses in the benefice – those who will support but who are reluctant to step forward. We can't maintain the church without those pillars.

Your wardens have that extra quality about them which allows them to take a lead, stepping out in faith. They humbly and gladly model 'true religion' for us. Not that they are good at it. Perhaps they feel that no one else will do the job and don't wish to see the church crumble. I suspect it is God nibbling at the soul. They have listened to his voice and the voice of The Church. They know it is the right thing to do, even though they are full of doubt.

Saint-making

We are all like James – a mixture of arrogance and doubt. James learned his saintliness from His Master and from the other apostles. Some of us might become wardens but all of us are called to be saints.

The world is a school for holiness. We make mistakes; we learn from them; we find better ways to conduct our lives. Keats called it 'a vale of soul-making'. And if life is a vale of soul-making then The Church is a class-room for saint-making, for doing things differently.

Make no mistake about it. Church is different. If you use google maps to find a place, you won't find churches marked. Spellcheck is similar. Living with that difference is critical to our growth in faith. But it won't stop us making those ordinary small sacrifices on behalf of our neighbour; developing meekness as James had to do; deploying transparency; exploring prayer; finding surprises in bible-study; giving the encouragement of Barnabus; relishing generosity.

Thanks be to God for those Olympian saints of the past. Thank God for our wardens. Pray for one another in the school of saint-making. Amen.