

Festival of St. James the Elder, Apostle
July 25, 2004

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Minneapolis, Minnesota

✧ Jesu juva ✧

GREATNESS IN CHRIST'S KINGDOM

I Kings 19:9-18; Romans 8:28-39; Matthew 20:20-28

Grace, Mercy and Peace be unto you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Among the twelve disciples of Jesus, there were three to whom Jesus was particularly close: Simon Peter was first, then James and John the sons of Zebedee. These men were privileged to witness events that the other disciples did not see. These three were present at the great haul of fish we heard about a few weeks ago, where they were called to follow Jesus. These three alone witnessed the raising of the daughter of the synagogue ruler. These three alone saw our Lord transfigured on the Holy Mountain. These three accompanied Him as He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane before being taken prisoner and crucified. Simon Peter our Lord called "the rock". And James and John He called the "sons of thunder".

All three were present at Pentecost, along with the rest of the eleven, and were commissioned by Christ to go out with His Gospel into the world. We hear quite a bit about Peter's work as the leading apostle of the Church. We also know quite a lot about John's life and work, being the great theologian of the apostolic era, and the last surviving apostle of the 1st century. But of James we hear very little. The reason for this is, of course, that James, one of Jesus' closest and most beloved disciples, was also the first one of the twelve to be killed. His thunder was cut short, as it were. And so today on the day we celebrate St. James the Elder, you see red before your eyes, the color of the blood shed in the name of Jesus.

But in our Gospel lesson today we meet James quite alive and with his brother John in the presence of our Lord. His mother is there too, and presents a rather bold petition to Jesus: "Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him. And He said to her, 'What do you wish?' She said to Him, 'Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom.'" Now these were two of Jesus' most favored and trusted disciples. And seeing this, the woman wishes to secure her sons' futures in the coming kingdom of Jesus. It is a natural desire for a mother to seek the success and welfare of her children. And so she seeks this great honor for them, an honor desired by all the faithful, to sit at Christ's side in His kingdom; but in this case, not just at His side, but at the right and at the left - the two positions of greatest honor. And this honor was desired not just by the mother, but by the sons, who are brought along with her and set before our Lord. Yes, they also wanted to positions of greatness in Christ's Kingdom.

And Jesus says in reply: "You do not know what you ask..." The phrase is very telling. James and John did not understand what they were asking for because they did not understand what it meant to be great in the kingdom of God. Neither did they understand the price at which that greatness comes.

Jesus continues: "Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" This may sound to us like a strange question. For us drinking the cup of Christ and being baptized in His baptism are things of blessing. They are not frightening to us, or things merely to be endured, but are the great sacramental gifts to us in which He gives us life and salvation. But those gifts came at great cost. For the cup is the cup of Christ's blood. And the baptism is a baptism into His death. To give these gifts He first had to shed His blood and die. Christ took up the cup of God's wrath on our behalf. And this He drank completely, so that we not be forced to choke down this bitter and deadly libation. He turns the cup from wrath to blessing for us. But here it is associated not with blessing, but with suffering. And the baptism Jesus speaks about here is more than just His being washed in the flowing waters of the Jordan. It begins there, indeed, but is not complete until water and blood flow from His own pierced side. Christ enters into this baptism, again, for us. As a man, He takes our place in death, suffering the judgment of God against all unrighteousness that we might not have to be eternally engulfed by that judgment. Again, this baptism is a death. And He says to James and John, are you ready for this? Because this is what comes with greatness. You want to sit at my right and my left. Do you really want that? Are you able to follow Me into these things of suffering and death?

True greatness according to Christ consists not in outward honors, but in faithfulness. And with faithfulness comes the cross. Outwardly faith seems to reap dishonor. For the world is contrary to Christ and lashes out at Him. It mocks, ridicules, and attacks Him through His Christians. Because they are martyrs, that is witnesses to His greatness, and because they are strangers now to the world, citizens of a different, more blessed Kingdom to which the world has no access (having rejected Christ). Indeed our Lord here is the example: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave-- just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." Greatness comes through humility and through giving your life for others. Are you able to follow me in this you sons of thunder?

St. Matthew records "They said to Him, 'We are able.' So He said to them, 'You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father.'" And they did drink and they did endure this baptism, though each in their own way. For John lived the longest of any of the apostles. His martyrdom consisted in being a living witness of Jesus to the whole world. And as a witness he suffered and was imprisoned. James' martyrdom, on the other hand, was an early and violent death. Acts records it in a few stark sentences: "Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword. And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also." Why was James killed by Herod? Because he was great in the Kingdom of God. He stood out as one of the inner three, one of the leaders of the Church. And so He is put to death by the tyrant's sword. Likewise Peter was taken, but here God interceded and rescued Peter from prison. Why was James killed and Peter released? We are not told, except by what we see happen afterward, that Peter goes on to lead the proclamation of the Gospel in Judea and then to the ends of the earth. But James is called to be with Christ, to sit, not necessarily at the immediate right or left, but certainly pretty close to Jesus' venture. And blessed is he. For he followed his Lord faithfully. In Christ he was made great, and received the crown even before the others.

And now, after the pattern of our Lord Jesus, James stands as an example before us; an example of faith and of greatness. For so we also are to cling to Christ in faith and suffer all, even death, for His sake and for the sake of His Gospel. If we wish to be great in the kingdom of God, then this is the pattern we must follow as well. Luther goes so far as to say that suffering and cross are one of the marks of the Church. For the Christian life always involves the cross of Christ. And that cross brings blessing to the man of faith, but death to the old Adam of the flesh.

And this world is full of Herods who will be all too happy to wield the sword against you, whether that simply be to make your life more difficult, or to put an end to your life. For, as I said before, this world is at enmity with Christ and despises His faithful Christians. And so you, O Christian, are in a sense confronted with the same question that faced James that day that his mother put her request to Jesus. You are faced with the question: "Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" How will you answer? Will you answer as James and John with the answer of faith? Will you stick with Jesus no matter what? Or will you go the way of compromise with our world and the powers that be? Will you bear the cross or trade it for something lighter?

James and John could not have remained faithful if left to their own powers. And yet Christ said of them: "You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with." There was more going on in that statement than an exercise in Divine omniscience. Rather our Lord says that they would be able to follow Him, because He would enable them and strengthen them to do so. He knew what He was going to do for them. And therefore He knew that they would be able to endure.

And so it is for us. Indeed on our own, none of us could bear the burden. But none is called to bear it on his or her own. Christ bears it for us and with us. He is the one who makes one great in the faith. He makes one strong enough to endure. This He promises, as you heard through St. Paul: "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" The all things here are all things necessary to our life and salvation; the things of His grace. Paul roots these promises in the certain things Christ has already done for us. For Christ drank the cup of wrath and was baptized into death. Christ having been delivered up for us already, how could God possibly fail to give us lesser things and keep us in His grace? And so Paul says: "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified." Not only has Christ died for you (objective reality), but He has also chosen, called, justified, and glorified you personally (subjective reality). There can be no doubt that He loves you and will accomplish what He has promised for you. And this is the strength upon which St. Paul says we can stand against all of the crosses that may come upon us. "Who shall bring a charge against God's



elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." Note that Paul does not here promise a life of ease and outward success or honor, saying that the cross will be removed from you. Rather he is teaching that Christ will bring you through it in faith, and make you great in His own likeness. "Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Look at all God is doing for us here! He has given Jesus to die for us and has saved us from all sin and wrath. He has chosen us and called us to faith. He has made us His own in Holy Baptism and justified us. And now Christ makes intercession for us. And as He intercedes for us, He gives Himself continually to us. In His greatness He continues to be our servant, nourishing us by His Holy Word and feeding us with His own precious body, and giving us to drink of the cup of His holy blood. And strengthened thus with His grace, we are given what we need to endure and follow Him faithfully. And clinging to Him in faith, holding His grace and promises more precious than the fleeting things of this world, we are made victorious. Though slain by sword and cross, we are conquerors in Christ.

And so today as we remember the Apostle James, we mourn not his death, but rejoice in his victory. For though slain, he conquered Herod and this world, and bore faithful witness to Jesus Christ. And so also shall we. May He keep us in His grace, hold us in His right hand, make us great in faithfulness, and glorify us by bringing us through our crosses into bliss. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, to life everlasting.

✠ Soli Deo gloria ✠