

St James 24.vii.16 Geddington (9.45)

The James whom the Church remembers on this day is sometimes called ‘the Great’ in order to distinguish him from the other James, the son of Alphaeus, who lived at the same time and who also appears in the gospels. The other one sometimes called ‘the less’ which must be somewhat galling and, as if to compound the difference, the other one has to share a feast day with St Philip on 1st May. Today, however, it is James the son of Zebedee a brother of John about whom we are thinking. It is this James who appears at all the important events, like the Transfiguration, or in the garden of Gethesemane on the night of Jesus’ arrest. He and his brother were nicknamed ‘Sons of thunder’ by Jesus because they were the ones who wanted Jesus to send down a thunderbolt and blast an inhospitable town in Samaria.

In our reading from St Matthew the blushes of James and John are spared a little in that it is their mother who asks Jesus to grant her two sons special

places of honour. Interestingly in St Mark’s version, which is generally assumed to be the earlier of the two, the request comes directly from the two brothers. The reaction is the same in both accounts; the other ten disciples are indignant and outraged and Jesus refuses their request. But they are not given a flat ‘no’, which would have certainly been in order; instead, Jesus takes the opportunity to tell them a little about the kingdom of Heaven. So perhaps we should not be too harsh on these two rash and impetuous men – or their mother for that matter – since as a result of their question, we know a little more about the Kingdom of God. It is in reply to their mother’s request that Jesus tells them, “whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

So rather than telling these two disciples off or even quietly reprimanding their mother for being too

pushy, Jesus takes this untoward question and uses it as an opportunity to talk about service. It is so counter-cultural in today's world. Service was much more common in most eras of history until our present day – either in the form of paid service or, of course, slavery. There may well be people here whose forbears were in service. It has a bit of a stigma for some today as if it is demeaning, but I don't think that is necessarily implied by Jesus. He talks about service being a mark of greatness. This is - as we know – a complete reversal of the normal way of the world – and it would have been even more so to his first audience. He is turning the usual way of things up- side-down. Or, if you prefer, he is showing an alternative vision for how the world might be when God's kingdom comes. In that well known hymn we talk about Jesus as the servant king and we have all probably sung it so many times that we no longer stop to think about how radical and

subversive an idea that really is. It is quite shocking that a king should serve. And this is the model of leadership that Jesus offers to those of us who are privileged to serve in his church. Jesus tells these two disciples – and by extension he tells us - that the right way is not to exercise authority over people by lording it over them. The true way is to follow Jesus in the way of servanthood. “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave.” It applies not only to those of us who wear our collars the wrong way round, but to all who seek to follow the way of Jesus.

And he makes this all the more explicit on the night before he died. We read how after his last meal with his friends he removed his outer garment and wrapped a towel round himself and then proceeded to wash the feet of his disciples. Peter, good old Peter, doesn't get it: ... And then, just for the

avoidance of any doubt he tells them what he has just done for them: “If I your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”

Service is at the very heart of what it is to be a Christian, a follower of our Lord Jesus. Like the words in a stick of rock service should run all the way through us in our deeds and in our thoughts. It’s not trendy or even particularly fashionable; in many way it seems to fly in the face of how our society lives and encourages everyone else to live. We need to be thinking of the needs of others rather than ourselves, as St Paul says “outdoing one another” in acts of loving service. “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

As we strive to live our lives in a Christian way, we could do far worse than try to copy some of the habits of our Lord Jesus and I would like to suggest that service is right up there. We need to offer ourselves , our souls and bodies in service to one another and to God and we will find that in his service is perfect freedom; freedom to be more fully as God intends us to be; free of the modern-day worries of this world and free from the concerns about our place in the next.

