

Less Familiar Disciples 3: THE OTHER JAMES

Mark 3:13-19 [MW20-25]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai, Sunday 28 June 2020

Some of you may have heard sermons on “James”

- there are in our Anglican Church Calendar three “James”:
the most well-known being one of the sons of Zebedee, brother of John;
then there is the brother of Jesus and leader of the church in Jerusalem;
and another James known only as 'the son of Alphaeus'
- those first two Jameses get a lot of publicity and sermon features
so I thought it was about time the “other” James received some attention

When we think of this ‘other’ James, the words anonymity and obscurity spring to mind

- which reminds me of this incident

Karl Barth, the famous theologian, was on a streetcar one day in Basel, Switzerland, where he lectured. A tourist to the city climbed on and sat down next to Barth. The two men started chatting with each other. "Are you new to the city?" Barth inquired. "Yes," said the tourist. "Is there anything you would particularly like to see in this city?" asked Barth. "Yes," he said, "I'd love to meet the famous theologian Karl Barth. Do you know him?" Barth replied, "Well as a matter of fact, I do. I give him a shave every morning." The tourist got off the streetcar quite delighted. He went back to his hotel saying to himself, "I met Karl Barth's barber today."

I guess maybe the only good thing about being the ‘other’ James

- is that it's better than being the ‘other’ Judas
and it would seem that unlike the other two less familiar disciples we've looked at
Thaddaeus and Bartholomew
- we really do know nothing, absolutely nothing, about this other James

Well, perhaps not absolutely nothing

- we do know that he is always the ninth disciple mentioned
in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke
the first in the third group of four disciples
- for people who like looking for meaning and patterns
there may be something significant here, but I'm not sure what ...

We also know that this ‘other’ James was “the son of Alphaeus”

- and we know that he was among those who went to the upper room to pray
after the ascension of Jesus
- we read in Acts 1:12-13

The Mount of Olives was about half a mile from Jerusalem. The apostles who had gone there were Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon, known as the Eager One, and Judas the son of James. After the apostles returned to the city, they went upstairs to the room where they had been staying.

The usually reliable *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* proved singularly unhelpful

- telling me more about what we don't know, than what we do know
although it did tell me there are at least five different ‘James’ in New Testament times

So I did what all good keen students do these days

- I consulted the modern oracle, the internet
the internet had been very helpful with Thaddaeus and Bartholomew
- and indeed as the search engine ‘Google’ informed me
there were 26,400 hits in 0.22 seconds for “James, son of Alphaeus”

However in following these up

- it wasn't long before I had to agree with the person who wrote:

Probably within the first few paragraphs of most all the sources I have telling me about James, the Son of Alphaeus, I would read words like "comparatively little is known about..." – "we know very little about..." – "few facts beyond scripture are known about..." and the Jerome Commentary says flat out "of whom we know nothing". It took me much time and many pages of disagreement, contradiction and questions to realize there was a great deal of truth in those words.

There is indeed a great deal of truth in those words!

However, Mark 3:13-19 reminds us that Jesus picked this 'other James' as one of the Twelve

- that's got to be significant
- his father is specifically mentioned, that's got to be significant too
- James Alphaeus is sometimes identified as the son of Mary, wife of Cleopas
- one of the women who stood at the cross
- because *Alphaeus* and *Cleopas* are assumed to be two forms of the same Aramaic name
- James is once called the son of Mary
- beyond that this 'other James' was a martyr
- and is remembered in the church calendar on May 1

This James was known as "James the Less"

- and it is repeatedly emphasized this simply meant he was shorter or younger than the other Apostle James
- and in no way inferior as either a man or an apostle
- the assumption is that he was born in Capernaum
- but there seems to be no information as to where he first met Jesus

Beyond this there are many questions surrounding the 'other James'

- none of which are answered satisfactorily
- for each question there are yes, no and maybe answers ...

Then to add to the mix, there is apparently a James in New Testament times

- who is better known than either of the apostles with this name
- 'James the Righteous' or 'James the Just'
- who it is thought wrote the New Testament epistle bearing his name
- and who was head of the church in Jerusalem

If you recall, the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* listed at least five New Testament James

- here's a bit of trivia
- I'm not sure how it will add to our salvation or get us closer to God or heaven
- but I thought it was interesting ...

Why is the name "James" so popular among Jews in New Testament times? Because it is the name of the ancestor of the people of Israel. The English name "James" is a variant of the name "Jacob." We tend to think of them as two separate, unrelated names. But the distinction between them is post-Biblical and not found in Hebrew or Greek. In Hebrew, the name is Ya'akov. In Latin, it developed two forms, *Jacobus* and *Jacomus*. From the former, we have the English *Jacob* and the Spanish *Diego* and *Iago*.

From the latter, we have the English James, the Scottish Hamish, the Spanish Jaime, and so on. But in many languages, there is only one name, given to the Old Testament Jacob and the New Testament James alike. Even in English, our present distinction has not always been observed. In Shakespeare's play *Measure for Measure* (III,ii,204), a child's age is given as "a year and a quarter old, come Philip and Jacob," meaning, "a year and a quarter old on the first of next May, the feast of Philip and James."

This 'other James' does make it into our Calendar of Saints

- on May 1st, a day shared with Philip
- another apostle about whom not much is known, but slightly more than our James
- this is what *For All the Saints* has to say:

Our information about James is even scantier, though it becomes more complicated by the tendency in later tradition to confuse or equate various people called James who appear in the New Testament. The Calendar in the Prayer Book clearly separates three people called James: (1) one of the sons of Zebedee and brother of John; (2) James of Jerusalem brother of Jesus and leader of the church in Jerusalem after the resurrection; and (3) James, son of Alphaeus, commemorated with Philip as an apostle on May 1st. This last James is sometimes called James the Less to distinguish him from the others. Apart from his inclusion in the lists of the twelve apostles we know nothing about him, and even the oblique reference to "Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses" (Mark 15:40) at the crucifixion may not be about him. The commemoration of Philip and James on the same day is very ancient, and may go back to the dedication of a basilica to both apostles, where the supposed remains of Philip were buried.

So what can we say about James?

- Rev. H. S. Vigeveno called him the saint of the "nameless ones - named by the Saviour and known by name to God"
- an encouragement to us who are maybe never going to even make it into the official calendar
- perhaps nobody in the end will remember, write about or even care what we did as a follower of Jesus
- yet it makes a huge difference, in the universe, in the 'great scheme of things' it makes a huge difference to God

In my research on the internet I came across a site trying to sell me a book about our James

- I thought, wow, nobody knows anything much about this 'other James' and here someone has written a whole book about the guy
- someone's taken advantage of a huge opportunity I'm sure James would be impressed
- the title intrigued me though: *The Apostle Who Rendered Obscure Service*

"Obscure service?"

- hmmh, if I didn't know better I'd say I'd come across one or two followers of Jesus who rendered obscure service
- very obscure service!

Then I thought a bit more

- Jesus would not have picked this 'other' James as one of the Twelve if he did not have something important for him to do
- if there was not a place, if he did not have a particular gift and a task only he could carry out in the great scheme of things ...

This 'other' James did something absolutely stupendously amazing

- it's just we're not sure, we don't know, exactly, what it is!
that's why the book title calls it 'obscure service'
- what this James did is hidden, obscured in the mists of history
he worked "anonymously"

This James cannot be called, "James the Great"

- but he certainly deserves to be known as more than the 'other James'
one writer after all their exhaustive, exhausting and ultimately fruitless research says
I will never again think of him as "James the Less" remembering that, in an effort to gather and
sort information, I probably spent more time with him than with any of the other Apostles and
regretting I had to leave him convinced, but unable to prove, that recorded history leaves him
greatly underrated

Convinced, but unable to prove, recorded history leaves this James greatly underrated

- James, the patron saint of faithful nameless ones
James, patron saint of all who render 'obscure service'
- may the fact that his name is in the list be a great encouragement for us all

And now, consider this:

Edward Kimball is probably not known to you. He lived over a hundred and fifty years ago. He was a Sunday school teacher in Boston, where a young teenager became part of his class. The young man was a country boy. He didn't know the ways of the city or of the church. But he came to Kimball's Sunday school class. When the teen first came to his class, Edward Kimball handed him a Bible. When Mr. Kimball said, "Turn to the Gospel of John," the country boy didn't know how to find the Gospel of John. Edward Kimball recognized what was happening, and while the other boys were snickering, he opened the Bible to the Gospel of John and handed it back. When he asked the boys to read, the country boy fumbled as he read. But Edward Kimball had a big perspective, and he saw possibilities in the boy. Kimball worked with him, and after some months he went down to the store where the boy was working, went into the back room where he was stacking boxes, and led Dwight to Jesus Christ. That was the beginning of the ministry of Dwight L. Moody, the United State's greatest evangelist during the 1800's. You didn't know Edward Kimball, an obscure Sunday school teacher who had a vision. But his vision transformed a young man who became a significant person.

To conclude, this prayer from the commemoration of St Philip and St James, 1 May:

*God,
whose work is never done,
look on us with Philip, James,
and all the countless millions
who have served you, and who serve you still.
Amen.*