

## **Sermon 28/07/24 Pilgrimage**

Pilgrimage as Richard has told us is a journey both physical and spiritual. But why are we so interested in pilgrimage on the day when we are celebrating the dedication of this church to St James? Simply because St James has for a long time been associated with the idea of pilgrimage. In art and architecture he is usually depicted with a pilgrim hat, to give protection from the sun and rain, and the scallop shell that has become the symbol of the pilgrim.

But let's start by seeing what we know about James from the New Testament. He along with his brother John were fishermen, working with their father Zebedee, on the lake at Galilee. With Andrew and Peter they were the first group of the disciples to be called. They were there at the beginning of Jesus ministry.

Along with John and Peter James shared many of the significant events of Jesus life, even when the other disciples were not included. Today we would probably designate them as the leadership team, then they were just special friends. This meant they also shared in deeper explanations of what was happening. Although as the incident in today's reading took place immediately after Jesus had warned them of his impending death, and they appear not to have understood what he was telling them, maybe those explanations were not really heeded. Perhaps we should not be surprised that their mother asks for special privileges for them – to sit one on the left and one on the right when Jesus became King.

Just what may have been going through her head as she asked this? One possibility is that the brothers put her up to it. 'We can't ask Mum, maybe you could ask for us'. They felt that they were special and deserved this extra reward and the power that would seem to be attached. Maybe she did ask for herself, seeking the glory that would accrue to her – we have all seen it - parents who push their children to achieve, perhaps because they have not done themselves.

It is the indignation of the other disciples that I love. The, 'Who do they think they are?' The jealousy. Were they perhaps hoping for this themselves? Maybe a bit scornful of the brothers having Mum ask on their behalf – I think I would be.

How must Jesus have felt! The disappointment. All that time and effort in teaching about fairness, humility, love for each other and avoiding glory, and suddenly his own friends are squabbling over wanting a privilege that is not even in his power to give. And they should realise that. He tests them. Are they willing to endure what he must endure? They confirm that they are. And then he explains that it is his Father who will grant what they are asking, not him.

And James did also suffer an early death. We learn in the reading from Acts that James was beheaded on the order of King Herod.

Now we are at the hands of legend. The story is that after the execution the body of James was put into a boat, that had neither a sail nor a rudder. The boat was allowed to drift and eventually grounded on a Spanish beach covered in cockle shells. The Spanish buried the body, which was then lost for several centuries. After this the body was refound, guided by mysterious starlight, and in veneration the beautiful cathedral at Santiago di Compostella was built to house it. St James became the patron saint of Spain. The cockle shell was adopted as his symbol, having practical use for pilgrims as a water scoop or dish. There are slightly different versions of the story including that James travelled to Spain as a missionary and preached there before returning to Jerusalem.

Christians have been travelling to Compostella since the 9<sup>th</sup> century to be in the presence of St James body. Later in the medieval period it was regarded as a sort of flagship among pilgrimage sites probably promoted by monasteries along the routes able to increase their wealth from the tourist trade. They were like some sort of medieval Thomas Cook. It is still a pilgrimage destination. If you were here on Thursday morning you would have heard Theresa talking about her journeys there. On the altar this morning I have put our copy of the way marker – posted in prominent places to guide pilgrims along the route. Brought back from Compostella after a parish trip.

We think of pilgrimage as a spiritual experience, that journey both physical and spiritual, but we also know that there is a social side to travelling together. Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims were a mixed bunch with different motivations for their journeys. From the knight wanting to give thanks for his safe return from foreign fights, to the lady from Bath a serial pilgrim who Chaucer tells us had been to Jerusalem, Rome, Bologna, Compostella and Cologne. (Possibly in search of husband number six).

Not everyone is able to make a traditional sort of pilgrimage, travelling under their own steam, walking or by bike, across many miles, through many weathers and using a diversity of accommodation. It takes time, and energy that not everyone has available. But try thinking in smaller terms. We all have places with which we have a special resonance. The site of significant events in our lives, the place the family came from originally, just a place where we feel closer to God or more at peace.

For some of us these are places obviously associated with the spiritual, they could be wild and rugged, have sporting contexts, be far or near, and I'm not discounting the idea that someone is thinking of Piccadilly Circus. They are places that mean something to us, and where we would like to go or more probably to return to.

As you came in this morning you should have been given a shell shaped pilgrim badge. There is a space at the bottom to write where you would go on your pilgrimage. Please fill it in, wear your badge and perhaps talk to others about their places over coffee later.