

**Parish Church of Saint James
King Street, Sydney**

**SAINT JAMES THE GREAT
26 July 2020**

I would like to thank the rector, Fr Andrew, for his gracious invitation to preach this morning, and for his hospitality in welcoming me to the parish for the patronal festival. It is good to be with both my predecessor, Bishop Richard, and my successor. These are unusual times; and it is important that we can come today as the Body of Christ, whether here or online.

Spray-painted with slogans such as 'sovereignty never ceded', many statues of Captain James Cook, such as the one near here in Hyde Park, were vandalised last month during the Black Lives Matters protests which have been sweeping the Anglosphere world.

Colonialism, dispossession, and, of course, slavery are among the many crimes of which Cook, together with leaders of the early colonial governments, stands accused.

Deemed guilty, Cook and the others are damned, and efforts made to erase them from our history – and our drinking culture, if the fate of the Captain Cook pub in Paddington, a suburb of Sydney, is anything to go by.

Setting aside the question of whether slavery did exist in early Australia, we can be in no doubt that today slavery forms no legal part of the Australian economy. The tragedy is that modern day slavery, the most miserable form of existence, does persist in many countries.

In the ancient Near Eastern world, by contrast, slavery – the ownership of one human being by another – was economically, socially, and legally integral to society. Centred mostly around the households of the rich, slaves were an indispensable, accepted part of daily life.

Today, we shudder at the idea of slavery, and rightly so; indeed, I think we ought to shudder more than many of us living in the prosperous and free West actually do. In part, that is probably because it is actually so hard for us to imagine what it's like to be a slave.

But the people listening to Jesus did not find it hard. When he warned them in the Sermon on the Mount about trying to serve God and wealth, they would have known what Jesus meant when he said: "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other." (Matt 6:24)

And again, here is Jesus using slavery to teach us about being disciples, about being his followers. Does that shock us? Or do we hear it and say, "Well, of course." Or perhaps

we hear it and think, “Well, that can’t apply to me, surely.” And if we thought that, we would not be alone.

For the gospel passage appointed for the festival day of St James’, begins with that ambitious mother of the sons of Zebedee – that is, James the Great, patron of this parish, and his younger brother, John – with mum asking Jesus to look after her two boys.

Wasn’t she listening when, at around this time, Jesus was foretelling his passion, as recorded in the verses just before our passage? He told them all that the Son of Man would be mocked, flogged, and crucified. Yet mum is after positions on the left and the right in the new kingdom.

Perhaps the Zebedees thought that the kingdom, of which Jesus speaks so often, was about to be set up, and that that was why Jesus was going to Jerusalem. Well, there is a kind of faith in that request because they clearly believed that Jesus would establish this kingdom.

And can they drink the cup that Jesus is about to drink? Of course they can. Remember, these are the two brothers whom Jesus calls Boanerges – that is, ‘Sons of Thunder’ – according to Mark’s Gospel. They earned that nickname because of their ardent zeal.

So it’s no surprise that they didn’t check first to ask what exactly was going to be in this cup. The cup to which Jesus refers, of course, is the cup of suffering – an image traceable back to the Hebrew scriptures which he often uses when talking about the fate that will befall him.

And in due course, the brothers would drink from that cup, as Jesus tells them – John by exile to Patmos; and James by martyrdom – the first of the disciples to die a martyr’s death – when he was killed by Herod Agrippa in around the year 44, as we heard in that passage from Acts.

But for now, the Zebedee brothers are keen to see the kingdom established, and keen to gain a couple of preferential seats; and so is their mother.

This failure to understand what Jesus was talking about, however, was no minor misunderstanding, says NT scholar, Leon Morris. Rather, he says, it was “an error at the heart of what service in the kingdom means.” And it was a mistake all of the other disciples made at one time or another.

And not just once; they did so on many occasions. But our conceptions of human ambition, of what it is to be successful – or even great – clearly have no place in the kingdom of which Jesus speaks. And it is something Jesus makes plain once again in today’s gospel.

The best status for a human being is not to rule – to “lord it over” others, to use Jesus’s words. It is to serve; or, even worse, to be a slave – something that is truly shocking to

our 21st century ears. You want to be great, says Jesus: be a servant. You want to be first: be a slave.

“To set one’s heart on eminence,” says Leon Morris, “is to lose the heart of the Christian way.” We must, in other words, arrange our lives not with the goal of ruling, or lording, or tormenting; but with the goal of giving ourselves for the benefit of others – just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.

So how are we to live today – we Christians who gather here under the patronage of James, son of Zebedee; James the Great; James, who did drink deeply from the cup of suffering after all? How are we to recalibrate our lives, especially in this strange age of pandemic?

Well, first of all, the Good News that comes to us today is that Jesus invites us, once again, to live with open hearts marked by a willingness to serve, to be the servant – even the slave – of others.

Jesus is not endorsing slavery, of course. Remember that it was simply an unquestioned part of his world. But he does say that jostling for what the world considers honour and status is not the way of the Cross. “It will not be so among you,” says Jesus.

And why does it need to be so among us? Why should it be? Of course, we have our part to play as responsible citizens and members of our communities. But we must also remember that we are called by Jesus to be citizens of another realm, of another kingdom, as it were. It’s a new kind of freedom. And for this freedom, this liberation, we can be truly thankful.

Hear the words of St Paul: “But we have this measure in clay jars, that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.” (2 Cor 4:7)

This liberation is the light of the gospel, the light of good news. It is the treasure of which St Paul speaks in his Second Letter to the Corinthians – this treasure housed in a clay jar.

Treasure, that is to say, housed in this fleshly body that you and I inhabit. Paul speaks of clay jars lest we should err in thinking that everything we have, and are, comes not from God, but from ourselves alone.

This light of the gospel, this extraordinary power of which Paul speaks, and which comes from God, is what enables Paul to carry on with his ministry, and to bear whatever physical hardships and punishments are visited upon him.

And Paul, ever mindful of the hardships he and other members of the young Christian churches must face, expresses his determination never to give in, never to yield to his opponents, and never to lose heart – “because we know that the one who raised the

Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence.” (2 Cor 4:14)

So, the second way in which we are to live is with a spirit of gratitude – gratitude which was described by G.K. Chesterton as “the mother all virtues.” Gratitude, says one scholar, is our response “to the goodness of God’s grace in creation and redemption, the authentic hallmark of the disciple of Jesus.”

This idea is captured rather beautifully in some remarks by the Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard: “I am a poor wretch whom God took charge of, and for whom he has done so indescribably much more than I ever expected that I only long for the peace of eternity in order to do nothing but thank him.”

So how are we to live today in response to the God who has “done so indescribably much more” than we ever expected?

As disciples of Jesus, followers along the way who share the companionship of James, one of the sons of thunder, we are to live readily in a spirit of service, prepared to give ourselves into the hands of the Lord who calls us.

And we are to live with a spirit of gratitude that we have, indeed, been called; that we are known by the Lord; and that no affliction, no hardship, no uncertainty generated in these uncertain days of pandemic – nothing can separate us from the love of God.

We are, indeed, jars of clay. But we carry within us that treasure which is the “light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”. (2 Cor 4:6) May we strive to make that glory visible in these clay jars of ours – until our work on earth is done.

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Sunday 26 July 2020