

*Right dear are thy friends unto me, O God, and held in highest honor: their rule and governance is exceeding stedfast.*

+

Today we celebrate the feast day of St. James the Great, the brother of St. John the Divine. He was a son of Zebedee, which means he was also a fisherman, and a disciple of Jesus, one of the inner circle of the twelve. He was originally a disciple of St. John the Baptist but left John the Baptist to follow Jesus. He is also called a “son of thunder” because he and his brother wanted to destroy the cities that were inhospitable to them and to Jesus. His mother came to Jesus asking that her two sons be allowed to sit one on Jesus’ left and the other on His right in the Kingdom of Heaven. To this request, Jesus asks her if her sons are willing to be baptized with the baptism he is to be baptized with, are they willing to die for the faith? And then Jesus prophesies, they will indeed share in the cup which He shall drink. But He cannot promise a throne for them, not even a lesser throne for them in heaven. This conversation about being greater than and receiving thrones in heaven caused dissension among the rest of the Disciples, which Jesus used as an opportunity to teach his disciples about who is greater than or less than in the Kingdom of heaven. He reveals to them that the Kingdom of Heaven is the opposite from any earthly kingdom, that the greatest in heaven is the one who serves, who puts themselves last.

St. James must have taken these words from our Lord to heart. For he is among the first to take the Gospel to another land, taking the Gospel to Spain within the timespan of the first 12 chapters of the Book of Acts. According to legend while frustrated at his attempt to evangelize Zaragoza, Spain, he knelt by a river to pray for guidance and inspiration, his prayer was answered and he witnessed the first apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary who encouraged him to continue his mission. So successful was his mission to Spain that seven of his converts became Bishops. Upon St. James’ return to Jerusalem Herod began to persecute the Early Church and sentenced St. James to death by the sword. He was so courageous even in the face of his own martyrdom that the officer who helped to have him arrested repented, declared that he was also a Christian and was martyred along side St. James. According to tradition, sometime between this supernatural conversion of his accuser and his martyrdom, St. James also found the time to heal a paralytic. St. James is the only Apostle whose martyrdom is recorded in the Scriptures.

St. James, the first Apostolic martyr, teaches us a couple of important lessons about the Christian Faith. The first is that to drink the cup which Jesus drinks, to be

baptized with the baptism He is baptized with, is to be willing to suffer or die for our faith in Jesus Christ. Even if we say we do not desire the highest seat in heaven, a throne, or a crown, yet to confess that we are a Christian means that we must be willing to sacrifice, even to suffer and die for the Faith *once for all delivered to the saints*. We may be grateful today that we do not live under the persecution of Herod or of the Roman Emperors of old, how lucky we are that we do not have to worry about our families or neighbors handing us over to the authorities, of facing martyrdom by the sword or wild animals in the Coliseum. We face a different martyrdom for the time being, we must die to our modern culture. We must follow Christ, be good Christians, keep God's commandments and love Him, in spite of a world and culture that is opposed to Jesus Christ. We do not face a literal martyrdom, instead we face losing friendships, family relationships, well paying jobs, social activities, we face ridicule and rejection for following Jesus. The Apostles made this clear, we must choose Christ over the world, for Him they have given their lives, they have set the example we must follow.

The Apostles, the Saints of the Church have set us the example, they have taught us what is worth dying for, that we must be steadfast in the faith, but we must not overlook the fact that they have taught us that we must be joyful, courageously joyful. The faith of the Saints is contagious, and so should our faith be contagious! We see this in the life of St. James, after Jesus ascends into heaven he goes and preaches to the Spanish, from this mission come seven Bishops, a wonderful testimony to his missionary zeal. He returns to Jerusalem where he faces martyrdom courageously, and his faith and courage are so contagious that the man who turned him into the authorities is converted on the spot and is martyred with him, and even on the way to his death the sick are healed. The Church does not expect us to be able to work miracles, but St. James reminds us that the Church expects us to have a lively and attractive faith. One of the goals of the Christian life is that others will be inspired by witnessing our faith. And this does not just mean inspiring conversions but to build each other up and to encourage each other. God has said, *be ye holy, as I am holy*, be set apart, dedicated to Jesus Christ and His Church. It may sound like too much to expect from the average church goer, but it is what God expects from each of His followers. We must stop thinking that to be a Christian means that we have a long list of things we cannot do or places we cannot go. Let us focus instead on how being a Christian means learning to choose what is truly good, truly healthy, truly life-giving, and truly holy.

C.S. Lewis writes, *Holiness is irresistible. If even ten percent of the world's population had it, the whole world would be converted and happy before the year's end.* Happiness, as we have heard in the Gospel, does not come from the promise of a throne in heaven, but by service. True happiness, and the measure of a good Christian, is to follow Jesus for Jesus' sake, that is true holiness. And holiness is to drink the cup that Jesus drinks from, knowing that the cup we drink will strengthen us for the turmoil we will face through our lives. We pray that the cup we drink will fill us with a lively and contagious faith, that many through our humble lives will be converted. May we like St. James, show Jesus Christ to everyone we come in touch with, even if it be on the way to our own martyrdom, and may we by our lives, our words, and our deeds, point everyone to heaven. Amen.