

St.James's Day 2016

St.James's Life as a Disciple

James is only mentioned a few times in the gospels but he plays an important role in some of the most well-known accounts of Jesus' ministry.

He is first mentioned in the gospels of Matthew and Mark when, as a fisherman by the Sea of Galilee, he and his brother John were invited by Jesus to be followers. Along with the two other brothers, Simon Peter and Andrew, Jesus called them all to be "fishers of men" and they followed him.

Later in the same gospel accounts, James and John's mother asks Jesus if they might sit on either side of him when he becomes king. Jesus famously replies that she doesn't know what she is asking and that they will have to suffer as he is to suffer. The other disciples were angered by this request but Jesus used it as a chance to show them that they should not look to be cared for themselves but to care for others instead.

In Luke's gospel, James is again mentioned when Jesus and his disciples visit a Samaritan town. When they are not welcomed by the people there, James and John offer to command fire from heaven to burn the town. Jesus tells them off though and shows his mercy by moving onto another town without any fuss.

James's family were also very prominent in the life of Jesus. His father Zebedee was well known as a fisherman in the area where Jesus spread the word of God. James's mother Salome also followed Jesus, was present at his crucifixion and was one of the women who brought spices to Jesus' tomb on the day of his resurrection. Finally, his brother John was loved very much by Jesus and was the one that Jesus trusted to look after his mother Mary when he died.

What did St.James's teach us?

That we should look to be last, not first, and also that we should show mercy to others, putting their needs before our own.

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St.James's Journey to Spain

James is said to have journeyed to Spain very soon after Jesus ascended into heaven – he went to spread the good news but his first attempts were unsuccessful and he returned to Jerusalem with his own disciples.

His name became well known for the acts that he performed and, after his death, his disciples took him back to Spain where he was buried. The place where he was laid to rest became known as Santiago de Compostela which means St.James in the Field of the Star. It became very famous locally but not so well known further afield until the 11th century when pilgrimages around Europe became very popular. It is now the third most visited Christian site in the world after Jerusalem and Rome.

As well as being our saint here at St.James's Hampton Hill, James became the patron saint of Spain because of his attempts to bring Christianity to that place. There are many Spanish legends of James being involved in famous victories for Christian armies fighting against their enemies. There are even more works of art showing James on his horse with his sword in his hand, trampling the defeated enemies of Spain.

What did St.James's teach us?

That Jesus is with us in our own struggles, alongside us when we are facing our challenges and shares our joy when we triumph over our problems.

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St.James's Death

After performing a number of miracles when he returned to Jerusalem, James drew the attention of King Herod Agrippa who had him executed. James is the only apostle who is mentioned as being martyred in the New Testament and it has become commonly held that he was the first of the apostles to be put to death in Jesus' name.

James's disciples also suffered after his death. They are said to have rescued his remains and taken them down to the sea where a boat appeared and miraculously took them back to the location of James' preaching in Spain.

When they asked for a burial place for his body, they were thrown into prison by the king. The king met his doom when a bridge over which he and his army was travelling suddenly collapsed – the disciples were released and they were given a palace by a wealthy local lady who had been converted by the miracles she had seen them perform. They buried James there.

What did St.James's teach us?

That our life with Jesus demands sacrifice from us but that we will be rewarded.

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The Pilgrimage to Santiago

The idea of making a pilgrimage originally came from a system of penance, or punishments for wrongdoing. A penance started with fasting for a period of time depending on how serious the sin committed had been. A pilgrimage was one of the most serious forms of penance because in those days, travelling a long distance was very difficult and very dangerous – it was treated almost like an exile and many people who started a pilgrimage would never return.

It was mostly Christians making a penance that undertook the pilgrimage to Santiago. They were also joined by people who were seeking a miraculous cure for an illness or problem. Although pilgrimages were not well organised in the middle ages, a route emerged and became known as the Camino de Santiago or the Way of St.James.

From the 12th century, the way started to be marked by the scallop shell. Shells were sold along the way too and pilgrims would attach them to their cloaks as they journeyed.

As well as being a symbol of James' original career as a fisherman, there were also many stories of believers being cured by touching shells brought back from the coastline near Santiago.

The grooves in the shell are also thought by some to represent the many paths that Christians take on their pilgrimage, ending in a single point representing Santiago de Compostela. The shell may even have been used by some for eating food or drinking water.

Today, those first few pilgrims have turned into hundreds of thousands each year. They may travel for all or part of the way and, as well as walking, some make the journey by horse or donkey and even by bike. At the end of their travels, pilgrims visit the shrine of St.James in the Cathedral of Santiago – a pilgrims' mass is held daily at which the countries are read out from which pilgrims attending have come from. Pilgrims also receive the sacrament of penance or confession and are given a compostela, a certificate of completion of their pilgrimage.

What did St.James teach us?

That however long and hard the journey might be, if Jesus is with us, that journey will be worth it.