

## *James the Just*

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano on  
The Feast Day of St. James of Jerusalem, October 23, 2011

St. James' Episcopal Church

Parkton, Maryland

It is a joy to be here in St. James parish to celebrate the feast day of St. James, and I am very grateful to your rector, the Rev. Elizabeth Orens, for her kind invitation to preach today. And, as you may or may not know, it's really fun being a guest preacher. There is a certain freedom to be bold knowing that later on this afternoon I'll be traveling south on I-97 toward Annapolis, and no matter what I say it will be Elizabeth, rather than me, who will have to answer questions like, "Did he really say what I think he said?" And, as a good and faithful parish priest, she will no doubt respond with phrases like: *reasonable people can disagree about these things; the Episcopal Church is a big tent; and remind me never to invite Pagano to preach at St. James again.*

As I said, it's fun being a guest preacher.

So here is my bold claim for today. St. James should be considered the Anglican early Church leader. For today, I will cede St. Peter to Roman Catholics and St. Paul to Lutherans. Invite me back another time and I will try to reclaim them! But today I want to focus on St. James and try to convince you that his example of righteousness should be an inspiration for Episcopalians and for the Anglican quest for holiness. To do this, we will look at two questions: Why was it that righteousness became the defining characteristic of James? And what do I mean by the Anglican quest for holiness?

First, St. James. As many of you know, James is remembered for many things. He was the brother of our Lord, or step-brother, depending on your point of view. *Reasonable people can disagree about that! The Episcopal Church is a big tent!* He was the first bishop of Jerusalem. He was martyred for his faith, thrown from the pinnacle of the Temple. He was all these things and more. But what James is primarily remembered for was his righteousness. As John Painter says, "Apart from God, who is righteous, and Jesus Christ the righteous, righteousness is associated more with James than any other early Christian figure; in fact 'Righteous' became his defining title or characteristic." i

Why?

Part of the answer comes from his saintly way of life. Eusebius preserves this description from Hegesippus: “Control of the Church passed, together with the apostles, to the brother of the Lord James, whom everyone from the Lord’s time till our own has named the Just, for there were many Jameses, but this one was holy from his birth; he drank no wine or intoxicating liquor and ate no animal food; no razor came near his head; he did not smear himself with oil, and he took no baths. He alone was permitted to enter the Holy Place, for his garments were not of wool but of linen. He used to enter the Sanctuary alone, and was often found on his knees beseeching forgiveness for the people, so that his knees grew hard like a camel’s from his continually bending them in worship of God and beseeching forgiveness for the people. Because of his unsurpassable righteousness he was called the Just and *Oblias* – in Greek ‘Bulwark of the people and Righteousness.’”<sup>ii</sup> Now, this account contains some legendary material, and scholars debate what is legendary and what is factual. But the basic picture of a saintly person, devoted to a holy life and to a life of prayer, seems accurate. And this is part of what I mean when I say that James should be an inspiration for the Anglican quest for holiness. But it is only part. If I just left it at ‘James was a holy man given to his prayers and we should be too’ this would be true, but rather bland. I said I was going to try to be bold, and the bolder claim has to do with the fact that James was considered righteous because he kept the Law of Moses. And when we start talking about keeping the Law and its relationship to righteousness then things get a bit more interesting. We see this in our first lesson from Acts.

In the early church there was a debate about whether Gentiles, that is non-Jews, who became believers in Christ had to be circumcised and follow the Laws of Moses if they were to be saved, in short whether Gentile believers had to become Jewish or not. Some thought they did. Others, namely St. Paul, didn’t. He claimed that believers, whether Jew or Gentile, were made right with God through faith in Christ and not by works of the Law. For Paul, Gentile believers didn’t need to be circumcised or keep the Law.

The debate came to a head and the apostles and elders gathered in Jerusalem to settle it. And, as an aside for the good people of St. James, you may have noticed that the person in charge of this assembly is James. Peter and Paul are present, but it is James who sums things up and James who directs the outcome of the assembly. Peter and Paul, like everyone else, defer to the authority of James. So for your next stained glass window I suggest commissioning a scene of Sts. Peter and Paul bowing before the authority of St. James! In any event, it is St. James who gives the decision: Gentiles don’t need to be circumcised or keep all the Laws of Moses. They ought to avoid a few things like food that has been dedicated to idols, sexual immorality, and consuming food with blood in it. Other than that, they need not follow the Law of Moses. This was a momentous decision in the history of the church. What began as a Jewish movement soon became a predominantly Gentile movement. And there is a certain irony, I suppose, that James is the one who handed down this decision because he is remembered for keeping the Laws of Moses and thought that Jewish believers in Christ should too. And in this I think St. James could again be an inspiration for Anglicans trying to figure out ways to stay in communion with believers whose practice of the faith may differ from them. Take note drafters of the Anglican Covenant! Remember the leadership of James!

The way James understood the Law in the Christian life has been a topic of renewed interest among New Testament scholars. But this has not always been an easy thing because the Protestant veneration for Paul and the Catholic claim of Peter’s supremacy has led to a skewed

portrait of James, too often painting him as someone who thought people could earn their salvation by keeping the Law. Recent scholarship is overturning the view, showing instead that James' vision of the Christian life was based upon a messianic belief in Jesus, in whose life, death, and resurrection, the prophesies and promises of scripture have been fulfilled. And it is in response to what God has done in Jesus that James encouraged believers to follow the obligations of the Law. Not to earn their salvation, but rather to give shape to a life lived in response to the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus. Keeping the Law was a way of leading a righteous life in the time between the resurrection and the return of the Lord. And, as Richard Bauckham has shown, for James, keeping of the Law was motivated by a transformed heart, and was summed up by Jesus' command to love, which should not be all that surprising if James was Jesus' brother!<sup>iii</sup> What James says about keeping the Law sounds a whole lot like what Jesus says about the Law in the Sermon on the Mount. In the Letter of James, keeping the Law is primarily focused on ethics, care for widows and orphans, fair treatment of workers, and forbearance of one another. So James encouraged people to keep the Law, but it was in the transformed way that his own brother Jesus had taught. Not as a way of trying to earn one's salvation, but rather as a way of trying to live a righteous life in response to what God had done in Christ. The Gentile Christian response was another matter, and James allowed that their response would be different. But for the messianic Jewish Christian community living in Jerusalem the shape of the response to the Gospel was to be found in Torah-observant Christian lives. This is why James is remembered as righteous.

It is this basic shape of the Christian life that I think should be inspiring to Anglicans. I think one of the things the Anglican tradition has done with particular genius, has been to say two important things about the Christian life. They are both true, but they exist in some tension with one another. The challenge is to affirm both at the same without collapsing or confusing them. The first point is that we are made right with God through the unmerited grace of God, by what God has done for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It is a matter of pure grace, a free gift. And the second point is that the way we respond to God's grace matters. We really should grow in love and compassion. The Christian life is both. It is about God's altogether unmerited grace and forgiveness, and it is also about the importance of conforming our lives to that grace and forgiveness.

You find this double affirmation, if you will, throughout the Anglican tradition. For my devotional reading these days, I am reading *Love's Redeeming Work: The Anglican Quest for Holiness*, which is a compilation of nearly five centuries of Anglican thought on the holy life.<sup>iv</sup> Over and over again, we find Anglicans saying both of these things: the Christian life is one that is completely dependent upon God's grace, and it is also a serious call to a devout and holy life. Grace and holiness. Samuel Taylor Coleridge puts it this way: "From God's Love through his Son, crucified for us from the beginning of the World, Religion begins: and in Love towards God and the creatures of God it hath its end and completion."<sup>v</sup> Our religion begins with God's unconditional love for us in Christ, and, then, it is completed in love of God and love of neighbor. The vocabulary may change a bit, but whether it is called justifying and sanctifying grace by Richard Hooker or being partakers of the divine nature by Lancelot Andrewes, it is essentially the same point. We are recipients of the altogether unmerited grace of God, and we ought to respond to that grace by trying to lead holy lives. Here's how a more recent Anglican, Barbara Brown Taylor, puts it: "Do love. Don't just think love, say love, have faith in love, or believe that God is love. Give up the idea that your ideas alone can save you. If you know the

right words, then bring those words to life by giving them your own flesh. Put them into practice. Do love, and you will live.” She goes on, “I know, I know. Works righteousness, Pelagianism, salvation by faith alone. I know, I know, but ... Jesus still said it, and if that makes him a not very good Protestant then I guess we’re going to have to live with it.”<sup>vi</sup>

I think this is a message that people want and need to hear today. It is the basic truth of the Gospel. We are saved by grace. God’s love is there for us, has always been there for, will always be there for us in Jesus Christ. And in gratitude for what God has done for us, we ought to conform our lives to God’s grace and forgiveness, in a holy life lived in the service of God and neighbor. To say that God loves us unconditionally and then act as if it doesn’t matter what you do is to cheapen God’s grace. To try to earn God’s grace is to miss the point of the Gospel. The Christian life is about both the amazing, unconditional grace of God in Jesus Christ, and the serious call to a devout and holy life.

And this is why I think St. James should be considered the Anglican early Church leader. In his own day, and in the language of his time, he showed us what a righteous life lived in response to the Gospel looked like. For him, this meant keeping the Law of Moses, especially as it was interpreted by his brother Jesus. The Anglican tradition, in its quest for holiness, is trying to do something similar. Maybe we don’t use the language of keeping the Law as much as James, but the basic insight that in response to the grace of God in Christ we ought to lead righteous or holy lives is pretty close. So, thanks be to God for the life and witness of James of Jerusalem, the Brother of the Lord, who shows us what a gracious and holy life looks like.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> John Painter, *Just James: The Brother of Jesus in History and Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), p. 276.

<sup>ii</sup> As quoted in John Painter, *Just James: The Brother of Jesus in History and Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), p. 122.

<sup>iii</sup> See Richard Bauckham, “James and Jesus,” in Bruce Chilton and Jacob Neusner, eds., *The Brother of Jesus: James the Just and His Mission* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), pp. 138-160.

<sup>iv</sup> Geoffrey Rowell, Kenneth Stevenson, and Rowan Williams, compilers, *Love’s Redeeming Work: The Anglican Quest for Holiness* (Oxford: OUP, 2011)

<sup>v</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lay Sermons*, in *Love’s Redeeming Work: The Anglican Quest for Holiness*, p. 359.

<sup>vi</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, Sermon preached at Peachtree United Methodist Church, Atlanta, GA, May 15, 2006.