

James the Apostle 2016

Jeremiah 45: 1 – 5; Matthew 20: 20 – 28

Well I wonder what a feminist critique would make of Matthew chapter 20! We've got an exchange between Jesus and two emerging giants of Christian tradition, James and his brother John. Today we celebrate James and give thanks that he, perhaps above all the apostles, was faithful to the command of Jesus to go and make disciples of all nations, taking the good news quite literally to the end of the earth (or at least the end of the known world at that time) to Fines Terre in north east Spain: Fines, end; Terre, earth – Fines Terre, the end of the earth.

And so the great pilgrimage routes through Europe end at Santiago de Compostela at Fines Terre. The church of Santiago, that's Spanish for St.James, is where the pilgrimages end at Fines Terre. The pilgrims have scallop shells attached to their cloaks or carved in the staffs – I've got one here: it's too small to

see the carving, but you can look afterwards – because the scallop shell is the symbol of St.James, the patron saint of pilgrimage. That's why the scallop shell is carved on the upright marker that guides us, in the graveyard, to the ledger stone that commemorates the shrine of St.John of Bridlington. It was a place of pilgrimage six hundred years ago. It's why I'm wearing my scallop shell cufflinks, brought back by my parents from St.James' Roman Catholic Cathedral in Sydney.

St.James is a big deal.

And when this exchange, between James and his brother John, that's part of the oral tradition of the early church's stories about Jesus, was first written down and recorded in St.Mark's Gospel, it is just that: an exchange between James & John and Jesus. Only there's a bit of an embarrassing moment, isn't there? and you can feel the awkwardness as they ask Jesus the sort of question that we know you shouldn't ask

Jesus. They ask him for preferential seats in heaven. And we know it's a bit of a faux pas, a bit of a social clanger, and that, really, these two have let themselves down.

But by the time, a few decades later, this story is taken up by Matthew's Gospel, and James and John's reputations are growing, their dignity and stature are protected by the faux pas, the clanger, being dumped on a woman. It is their mother who is made to bear the responsibility of embarrassing herself; and then just disappears out of the story and Jesus addresses the rest of the exchange to the men. It is a shameful example of editorial misogyny in the Bible.

And the irony is that it's done to protect these great men's dignities, when the whole point of the story is that you shouldn't stand on your dignity. Jesus said "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant."

And this story yields itself not just to feminist analysis, but to psychological analysis too. The Bible expresses in religious language truths that can also be expressed through the language of other disciplines. As well as being a spiritual truth that to gain your life you must lose it, it's also a psychological truth that to enjoy the best level of mental well-being you must look beyond your own needs. If you look at something like Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the most basic human need, at the bottom of the pile, is the need of humans for food and shelter; and more sophisticated needs are piled up in layers on top of that. And the highest level of self-actuation is letting go of self altogether.

And all this sophisticated psychological jargon is simply articulating, in the language of the social sciences, God's wisdom that people have been revering as scripture for millennia. Because even Jesus wasn't saying anything new when he said. Centuries before, in the Book of Jeremiah, the prophet's scribe Baruch was being counselled that the word of the Lord to him

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was to be not concerned about his life: “Do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not . . . I will give you your life as a prize of war in all the places to which you may go.”

Well, so far so good. We’ve got a slogan: whoever would save their life must lose it; and whoever would be great must be a servant; and all that sort of stuff. But what we need to work out is how we apply that stuff to the discipline of being a disciple of Jesus.

St. Paul has a sort of motif running through his epistles about the essence of being a Christian being to do with dying to self and living for Christ. It’s about stopping proudly clinging on to our individual identity; and instead of about us understanding ourselves as being a part of the body of Christ. In the Book of Common Prayer, written in “God’s own language”, in the post communion prayer it talks about us being “very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son, which is the blessed company of all faithful people.”

The litmus test is: do we think of ourselves as being people who *go to* Priory Church? Or do we think of ourselves as *part of* Priory Church? Is our membership of Priory Church part of the identity of who we are? Or is Priory Church something entirely other to ourselves, just a place we attend; something we support rather than the very essence of our being.

Winston Churchill was once asked whether he considered himself to be a pillar of the church; and he famously replied that he thought of himself as a buttress of the church: someone who supported it from the outside. I wonder: are you a buttress of the church, or are you a pillar of the church? Jesus invites us, not to think of ourselves, as isolated atomised individuals, but to find our true identity by losing ourselves and thinking of ourselves as part of the body of Christ; and to put all that we are and all that we have at the disposal of serving it.

Amen.

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