

Sermon - Evensong July 25th 2010
St James the Apostle
Jeremiah 26:1-15 Mark 1: 14-20

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Responding to the Word of God.

It was back in October 1991 that Phil, my husband, set out to walk from southern France, across the Pyrenees, then turning west to walk right across northern Spain to his destination in the city of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia. He had managed to arrange four weeks off work between qualifying as a solicitor and starting his first proper job.

He mostly walked alone, carrying the lightest of packs with the minimum of stuff, taking a wooden staff to aid him on his way, which proved especially useful for warding off stray dogs in the villages that he came across. Each night he looked for lodging in one the many free refugios (refuges) along the pilgrimage route - *El Camino de Santiago*, the Way of St James. Phil was taking up the call of being a pilgrim- a late 20th century one, following hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people before him who had done the same since this ancient pilgrimage route was established in the early Middle Ages. There are several routes that start in different places across Europe, but which all converge in the same last, long section across northern Spain to Galicia. Phil was walking the most popular route - the Camino Frances - and he completed the 760km (over 500 miles) in 28 days, collecting his 'Compostela' certificate and scallop shell in the great Cathedral of Santiago (St James) as his proof and prize.

It is in this Cathedral that tradition has it that the remains of St James the Apostle are buried, and thousands of people visit his shrine each year. Though the apostle died in Jerusalem, (in Acts 12 we hear that he was executed by the sword under the command of Herod Agrippa), legend has it that his body was taken to Spain (where he may have previously spent some time preaching the gospel). They came ashore in Finistère, North West Spain, where his body, as it was carried through the shallow waters to the beach, was said to become covered in scallop shells. The scallop shell therefore became the main symbol of St James and of the Camino, being useful to pilgrims carrying it for scooping up water, or using it as an eating bowl. We have Phil's scallop hanging in the study beneath his now framed certificate proving he was a '*peregrino*' (pilgrim).

Today we celebrate the life of St James the Apostle, and as this year the 25th July falls on a Sunday (what they call a jubilee year) the festivities

and grandeur of services in Santiago de Compostela will be even more elaborate. There will be hundreds of thousands of pilgrims gathered in the Cathedral and city, even as I speak.

So what do we know of St James? Much about him has been passed down as legend. We do not know for certain whether his remains really are in Santiago de Compostela, whether he even ever went to Spain. But we do know with much more certainty about him from stories recorded in the Gospels and Acts. We know that he and his brother John were known by Jesus and the Sons of Thunder probably because of their fiery zeal and enthusiasm for the gospel. James was a leader amongst the apostles and would have been present at most of the events in the earthly life of Christ. He was one of those present at the Transfiguration, and was close to Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane the night he was arrested. Later, after Jesus death, resurrection and ascension James became the leader of the early, largely Jewish Church in Jerusalem, and it was to James that Paul came to seek approval for taking the gospel to the Gentiles. And we know from Acts 12 that James was the first Apostle to be martyred.

In our second reading this evening, though, we go right back to the beginning of this extraordinary man of zeal. Mark tells us that James was a Galilean fisherman, probably from the same village as Peter and Andrew – Bethsaida. James and his brother John were in their boat mending their nets when Jesus came by and called them to follow him. And just as with Simon and Andrew, they immediately left their nets, left their Father Zebedee, and followed him. Just like that!

I don't know if that strikes you as quite extraordinary, as it does me, to respond so immediately and decisively to the call of a stranger. I have often wondered how I might have reacted had I been a fisherman in that boat and Jesus had called me? I may have said in response to Jesus: "how very kind of you. What an honour it would be and I'm sure I'd really love to come with you- yes it would be most interesting. But obviously I can't just leave my old dad here alone; I've also got the family to think about- you know bills to pay, make sure there's someone around to stop the kids arguing and be here to look after my aging mum! So I'll come when I can, you know, pop along to your meetings when you're in the area. Thanks for the invite though!"

And that's if I was having a good day. I might have been much blunter and even rude: "Who on earth are you? Expecting me to leave everything and follow you, a complete stranger. No way! You're a nutter!"

But what the gospel doesn't really show us is that James and the other apostles had probably come across Jesus quite a bit before this incident is

recorded. They may well have begun to know of his reputation in the area as a religious teacher, even a prophet. So when it came to this final call they were prepared. What is certain and important is that they recognized the voice of God in this man Jesus and were willing to listen and obey.

They recognized the voice of God in this man Jesus and were willing to listen and obey.

And I think that is our inspiration and challenge this evening. Are we aware of the voice of God, the word of God, calling us, guiding us, today, individually and as a church? How do we hear God speak today? Do we even expect to hear him? How are we to hear the word of God in our busy 21st century lives so far removed from 1st century Galilee? And if we hear how are we to respond?

I'm sure, like me, these are questions you've asked many times. The first thing to say is that recognizing God speaking isn't easy; anybody who pretends it is is being disingenuous. Like the people of Judah in Jeremiah's time that we heard about in our first reading, it isn't easy to discern what is from God and what is from man. They were so incensed by what Jeremiah was saying to them that they failed to recognize God's word in the prophet, and instead wanted him to be put to death.

But Jeremiah, like James 600 years later, knew it was God's word speaking through him. He was so confident of this that he was willing to die rather than not speak out. On this occasion the baying crowd saw reason and gave him the benefit of the doubt.; not so much later with James.

We have all, in one way or other, heard God speak to us and responded. We wouldn't be here were that not the case. We might have been touched by God through the services we have attended, recognising in hymns, prayer, scripture and sacrament the real presence of God in Jesus. We might have recognised God in one another – in what someone said or, more likely in how someone lives and loves. It might have been when we were alone that we heard a still small voice 'speaking' – the Holy Spirit urging and inspiring us with groans that are not words but which guide us to what is true. It is by all these means, and others, that our initial and ongoing call to faith and discipleship came to us and continue to come to us, reassuring us of God's love and presence, his forgiveness and healing. And occasionally there may be more specific calls or guidance from God that emerge as a strong feeling over time: 'I want you to do this or say that'. We should expect God to continue to speak to us today individually and corporately. Through prayer and

worship, discussion with others, and stillness, God wants to urge and guide us in what we say and what we do.

So our challenge is: do we listen and look out for his speaking? And are we willing to respond in obedience as St James and Jeremiah did all those years ago?

Sometimes it's that second challenge which I think is harder. We hear OK but are just not willing, able or ready to respond completely. It took me 15 years from knowing I was being called to ordination to finally go and do something about it!!..so don't look to me as someone who finds this easy! We may be afraid of the consequences of speaking out for God into the context in which we live today? It's fine if what he's urging is something we find easy and is within our comfort zone. But what happens when God wants us to speak out against an injustice we come across, maybe in the workplace. What do we do in the face of immorality or hatred? What happens when God wants us to do something that will be quite uncomfortable and costly to ourselves and our loved ones? That is when we need to learn to share God's call on us with others in the church; and to support one another in the mission and ministry we all share.

Because God needs us; he relies on us to be his messengers in our generation. We can't leave that up to a few individuals. We are all called, by word and example, to be missionaries of the gospel, and like St James did - to walk in his way, whatever the cost. But we can be assured that God promises to equip us with all we need for whatever lies ahead.

Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.

A Prayer by Christina Rossetti to finish:

Speak Lord, for your servant hears.

Grant us ears to hear, eyes to see,
wills to obey, hearts to love;

then declare what you will, reveal what you will,

command what you will, demand what you will. Amen.