

Today we commemorate St. James, the Elder. Next month, because of how the church calendar falls in relation to our monthly calendar, we will observe two other festivals on Sundays: those of St. Mary the mother of our God and Savior Jesus Christ, and the martyrdom of St. John the Baptist. We know well the abuse of other communions, where the faithful departed are called upon and asked for help by Christians. There is one Mediator, our Lord Jesus, who has commanded us to pray to Him and who alone has promised to hear us. We have no promise that the saints hear our prayers or are able to advocate for particular people and specific needs. Nor do we have any word in Scripture about extra merits that the saints possess that can be applied to us to aid in our salvation. We are saved by Christ's merit alone.

Why observe such days as today? Because we honor our fathers and mothers in the faith, we don't forget them. Just as our own fathers and mothers were often those who brought us to Christ, taught us the faith, so all those generations before us have handed on the holy faith to us. Like us they bore His Spirit, confessed His Word, and sought to live holy lives according to it. So we do right to honor them, remember them, and give thanks to God for them, and for their example to us. They are also powerful examples of God's mercy to His people. For none are saved by our own merits or worthiness, but by God's mercy and forgiveness. They are reminders to us to put our confidence in God's mercy for us in Christ Jesus.

So it is that we consider St. James the Elder, the son of Zebedee and brother to St. John. James was one of the first of our Lord's disciples, who was called to follow Him after that miraculous catch of fish in Simon Peter's boat about which we heard just three weeks ago. James was one of the inner circle of three who witnessed such mysteries as Christ raising Jairus' daughter from the dead, the transfiguration, and later our Lord's deep agony in Gethsemane. He appears quite frequently. And yet while the Holy Spirit has given us five writings through James' brother John, we have not only no biblical book from James, but not even any words of his own.

The two brothers speak together on two occasions. When a Samaritan village did not receive Jesus, the brothers asked Jesus if He wanted them to call fire down from heaven and consume it (Lk 9:51–55). They are zealous to the point of impetuosity. Jesus rebukes them for this, and this is perhaps the reason He gave them the nickname Sons of Thunder (Mk 3:17). In today's Gospel we again see the personality of these two brothers as they approach Jesus and boldly request to sit on His left and right in His kingdom. Perhaps it is because they, along with Peter, had seen those great things that the other nine had not seen. Or because they had been with Jesus from the get-go, among the first ones called to follow Him. Or it could be because they are very much like how many of us are, when someone we know comes into great wealth or recognition, we insert ourselves into their presence, name drop in order to benefit from our closeness to them. Win the lottery, become famous, and it's amazing how many long lost relatives you have!

Here we see, as we often do in Holy Scripture, that the saints of God are far from lofty figures to whom we are unable to relate. They are rather like us. They are poor, self-absorbed sinners, who for all their genuine love for the Lord love also themselves, and so often do not understand what it means to be called to follow Jesus, who forget that His call to discipleship is a call to deny oneself and take up our cross.

But notice how Jesus does not spurn James and his brother. Nor does He respond to the other ten with indignancy, who respond the way we will when we tire of others who bask in their own greatness, who exhibit a boldness that shows them to be too big for their britches. No, to both groups, to all His saints, He responds gently, directing them and us to Him.

He speaks to them of the cup which will soon be set before Him. The cup of God's wrath for sin that will be given Jesus to drink, the cup that He will plead be taken away from Him if at all possible. He speaks to them of the baptism which He will undergo; His death in the place of sinners. He will undergo the bitter pangs not just of human but of divine wrath. He will die under a sentence imposed by men, but also lays down His own life as the ransom for many, undergoing a death in our stead that we might escape it.

Can James and John do that? Can they drink of that cup, can they undergo that baptism? They still don't get it. Their self-confident boldness, the boldness of all the disciples remains up until the moment the Lord is arrested. Then they will all fall away. Not a one of them can stand and remain and do what Jesus alone does. The ones appointed by God to be there

as Jesus accomplishes these things are the two thieves. They hang and witness Jesus give His life and that ransom for many.

But James and John will, Jesus says, drink the cup that Jesus will drink. They will be baptized with the baptism with which Jesus is baptized. They will be joined to the death of their Lord. And so also you. You are given a cup to drink, it is set before you by your Father in heaven, He pours out for and upon you what He has to give you. And it is not wrath. That has been drunk already. He pours out not His judgment for your sin, but the forgiveness of your sin, accomplished in the very blood you are given to drink.

You are, as St. Paul says, **“baptized into [Christ’s] death.”** You were **“buried with Him by baptism into death.”** Not just the suffering of wrath, but the very penalty of temporal and eternal death, separation from God, which you deserve for all your sins, has already been suffered by Him. And through your baptism, His suffering is made yours, is credited to you. As is His resurrection. **“For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His.”**

And so the little outpourings of wrath which we undergo, not from God but from men; the tribulation, distress, persecution, danger, the sword, cannot **“separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** James and John both go on to suffer for the sake of their Lord. It can be no other way. We are slaves of all. We take the place of weakness. And that means that **“we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”** James is put to death, the first of the disciples to die for His Lord, the only apostle whose martyrdom is recorded in Holy Scripture. John too suffers the wrath of men poured out upon him. Though unique in that he is not put to death like his fellow apostles, John is imprisoned, it is there that he is bid to record his revelation, a book of comfort given to a suffering church.

John does not call down fire from heaven to consume his tormenters and guards. James does not pray for brimstone to smite Herod, the wicked government authority who abuses his power in order to please the unbelievers. They now see that Jesus’ glory is His death for them. They understand that their Lord and yours has undone the need to respond in wrath or fear. Their life and yours is in Christ. Death cannot harm them, cannot keep you. Life has been given through baptism into Christ. That life is strengthened in the partaking of the cup of salvation.

Loving not his life even unto death, James and so many others went forward as more than conquerors through the power of the one who loved them unto death and who will bring them and you unto the resurrection of your body and life eternal, where we will speak together with James and John and all the saints, nay, we will sing with them the great hymn of praise that is already being sung: **“Worthy is the Lamb...for You were slain, and by Your blood You ransomed people for God”** (Rev 5:10).