

Wearing Out Our Knees

Today in the life of the church we celebrate the Feast of St. James of Jerusalem, also known as James the Just and, depending on who you ask, perhaps the brother of Our Lord.

I had a feeling, when I first realized that the day we had chosen for this gathering was the Feast of St. James, that there was something terrifically serendipitous about our concluding our afternoon together with a celebration of this feast. There's something about celebrating James, the first bishop of Jerusalem, some Gospel within this story that God wants us to hear today. And so I considered what I might say.

I could talk about who James was, get into the Greek, and explore whether or not he really was the brother of our Lord. I could dig into his role as the first Bishop of Jerusalem, apparently presiding over one of the first Councils of the early church. In the context of the recent news of the Vatican to create personal ordinariates to welcome disaffected Anglican, Bishop James the Just presiding over a Council in which Peter is present...well it's very tempting to explore the theological ramifications of this text. But I won't talk about that.

I suppose I could explore the uniting force and priorities present in our reading from Acts 15, as the early church makes a compromise for the hope of the unity of the God's people. Here I could dig into the prohibitions, we could explore their source in Jewish law and in the context of first century Christianity. Perhaps we'd find that these prohibitions seem most likely related to the cultic practices of the first century. That is, that the Gentile Christians were beings asked to refrain from activities that even resembled pagan worship, thereby avoiding even the appearance of evil. Maybe we'd discover that there is then a distinction, that while the dietary prescriptions and other aspects of the holiness code were meant to separate and divide people, these four prohibitions exist to facilitate unity between Jews and Gentiles. And we'd find the importance of,

in the spirit of love and humility, always being willing to forgo all preferences of our own for the sake of the One Church. But, I think I'll choose not to speak about that.

Because about those prohibitions that we get so caught up in...in the midst of our work at analyzing their source and exploring their context and hermeneutical import for today we often miss the shocker that this text actually is: for the first time in the history of God's people Gentiles are institutionally welcomed into the people of God without having to first become Jews! This, contrary to the accepted interpretation of Scripture at the time, contrary to centuries and centuries of accepted practice, teaching, and tradition. The Spirit of God has moved and the church works in a hurry to understand and make room for what's going on. The tradition of first importance that Paul elucidates in 1 Corinthians 15 is the death, burial, resurrection of Christ, a tradition that winds up in creating a people that even a Jew like Paul needs to convert to become a part of. That tradition is central now. Even those pesky prohibitions reveal this: James' concern after all is that "we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God. He believes that the words of the prophet Amos are coming true, God is rebuilding a new Jerusalem wherein **all** people may seek the Lord—even Gentiles. And, according to James, anytime we put restrictions upon what it means for a person to become a part of God's kingdom, we should ask very carefully if they are our restrictions or God's, if they are restrictions of mercy or if they create too great of a burden for our brothers and sisters to carry. We don't want to be like the people in our Gospel reading, so caught up in our own understanding of the world that Christ ceases to be able to do deeds of power among us, because of our unbelief.

I could go that direction. But I think that I probably will not.

I won't say any of that stuff. I won't get into it because I believe that all of that work puts us in the wrong place when it comes to this text from Acts. All of that puts us outside of this text,

judging and critiquing the decisions made by the Council. Instead, we need to take our place within the text. We need to enter deeply into it, looking to encounter the same Spirit of God through which James speaks.

So instead, I'd like to talk to you about James' knees.

Do you know about James' knees?

In the fourth or fifth century, in his work *On Illustrious Men*, Jerome quotes second century Christian chronicler Hegesippus' account of James from the fifth book of Hegesippus' lost *Commentaries*. Eusebius of Caesarea also told this story from Hegesippus in the third or fourth century. Got all that? Don't worry, just remember, this is ancient stuff.

Anyway, as the story goes that James was a profoundly holy person, perhaps even high priest in Jerusalem for a time, and that he used to go "into the temple and pray in behalf of the people, insomuch that his knees were reputed to have acquired the hardness of camels' knees." Now, as clergy we know that it is necessary that we take these sorts of stories with a grain of salt. But while the details may be up for debate, the heart of the stories, what they reveal about the person are often deeply tied to that person's character. James prayed on behalf of God's people so much that his knees got hard, like the knees of a camel. Day in and day out, praying on behalf of God's people.

Now, some of you may prefer to read the story from Acts 15 as being about the importance of a group being willing to forego its own preferences for the cause of unity with the larger church. Some of you may prefer to read the story from Acts 15 as being about the church responding to the dynamic and new work of the Spirit. I imagine the heart of Acts 15 is probably somewhere between those two, located in an elusive unity. An elusive unity, as Paul Achtemeier says, for which Peter yearned, that Paul sought to achieve, which James attempted to preserve,

and which Luke labored to portray in his account of the primitive church—a unity that was in fact not achieved. And thus, it remains a dream, perhaps even a goal, right down to the present time. But where you find the greatest truth in Acts 15, whether in forgoing preferences for unity or in recognizing that radical welcome of the Spirit, is not what I'm concerned about.

What I want to know is have you worn down your knees? Have they gotten as hard as a camel's? Have you entered sacred space day in and day out on behalf of God's people? In a statement in response to the recent Vatican decision, the Society's Communications Director, Robert Hendrickson, said that the Society seeks to be "a place for the complexity of difference to meet the simplicity of devotion." There is a time and a place for sustained theological engagement, for wrestling with God and looking for the blessing of discerning a way forward, but in this place we will seek the other route: one that believes that true good can yet be done for the life of our church by all of us wearing out our knees in prayer and devotion. That, in the words of our collect from today, God's "church may give itself continually to prayer and to the reconciliation of all who are at variance and enmity." Because I have a hunch, just a hunch, that it is in our devotion and worship that the Spirit will speak most clearly to a troubled church.

So, my brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers of many in our Lord's church, let us follow James and wear out our knees in prayer.