

A Homily/Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert R. Hansel for the Feast Day of Saint James the Apostle on the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, July 25, 2010 at The Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

Sons of Thunder

Today we remember and celebrate the life of the Apostle James. Just as we said last Sunday in reference to Mary Magdalene, we really don't know a great deal about this person, even though he is "around a lot" in the pages of the New Testament. James is one of the first of those whom Jesus called to follow him as He began his ministry of preaching and healing. James was there when Jesus raised the daughter of Jairus, present on the mountaintop for the events we now know as Transfiguration, and there with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane just before the crucifixion. In short, James no doubt heard it all and saw it all. But, unfortunately for future history, he apparently didn't say or write **anything at all**. Yes, I know, there's a book in the Bible called James but that James is an entirely different person. The Apostle James was martyred in either 60 or 62 A.D., while the Letter of James, as we can tell by some of the people and events mentioned by its author, was written some 30 years later. Anyway, let's back up a bit and take a look at what we DO know.

James is always tied to his better-known brother, John. He seems always to stand in the shadow of his brother. Whenever we hear anything that he says, it is introduced by, "AND his brother, James." It's like they are speaking in a duet, never apart. And another interesting thing is that what little the two brothers have to say is always more of an exclamation—a blurt-ing-out of some top-of-the-head feeling rather than a thoughtful reflection. James and John seem to have a hair-trigger mentality that erupts now and then in the form of loud and usually irrelevant noise. They were seen as not fitting in at all, mavericks as we might say today. Even so, Jesus loved and respected their zeal and honesty but he found them amusingly outspoken, referring to them by a nickname. He calls them '**The Sons of Thunder.**'

We have in our Gospel reading for this Sunday a perfect example of the way these two brothers so often talk first and think about it later. They have what we might think of as "Foot in mouth disease." In Mark's Gospel it is reported that they are the ones who presumptuously ask Jesus for positions of honor and power in His coming Kingdom. They are clearly off base and are rejected by Jesus as being selfishly motivated. In Matthew's version, the request is attributed to their mother. Maybe Matthew thought that blaming a woman would cast the Apostles in a somewhat more positive light.

There's another example of the unbridled temper of James and his brother earlier on. They report that the teachings of Jesus have been rejected by a certain Samaritan village and so they ask for permission to "call down fire from heaven to destroy" those unbelievers. Cooler heads, of course, prevail and no divine incineration occurs. But, remember, these guys were the very first to join up in the Jesus Movement. They were totally convinced and believed anything was possible. They had given their ALL, risked EVERYTHING, and for them there could be no "backing off." But, the point is, James and his brother John are too often over-enthusiastic **to a**

fault...at least in ordinary circumstances. It's great to be committed but coercion, force, and punishment are probably not the best means of conversion.

I guess one way to describe the Apostle James would be that he was a "diamond in the rough." He was a fully devoted follower of Jesus but he needed a lot of patience and reshaping if his energy was ever to become a positive force rather than an embarrassment. Still, it's the "rough edges" of James that make him interesting and, eventually, important at precisely that moment to the effort of the Early Christian community. The very same "no backing off" mentality that we have already seen led James to put his life on the line and to be the first of the Apostles to be a martyr on behalf of the Christian Faith. When the chips are really down and it costs something to stay in the game, it takes people of real commitment to make a difference. His example of determination helped lots of others decide not to just "go along in order to get along" but, rather, to stand up and defy the powers that threatened to destroy the Church before it ever got established. The rough edges of James simply wouldn't let him slide smoothly into an inoffensive and irrelevant role. James forced the hand of the authorities by his outspoken, uncompromising "Sons of Thunder" witness.

James took a stand at a critical time. The persecution of the Church was just getting started and it was really an open question as to whether the Movement could survive in an openly hostile climate of religious and political oppression. When the authorities arrested the Christians they confronted them with a clear decision: either recant your beliefs or we will kill you. The easy response is, obviously, to save your own skin and the authorities welcomed that kind of proof that the whole Jesus Movement was a hoax. What was needed, of course, was a lot of brave people who would rather die than give in.

James was exactly that sort of flinty personality. From the back of the pack, James moved to the forefront. Rather than being a problem, now was the perfect time for the outspoken "Son of Thunder" to take the lead. The rough edges of James were exactly what was needed if things were going to hold together.

Let me tell you a little story that can, perhaps, clarify the point I'm trying to make. Sometime back I had the opportunity to spend an extended period in Saudi Arabia, doing some educational consulting work with American families employed by ARAMCO. There are no secondary schools in Saudi so children of U.S. petroleum workers have to return to the States to find boarding schools or find similar placement either in England or Switzerland. I met with students and tried to identify schools that might fit their abilities and interests. Anyway, one morning when I had a day off, I received a call from my local contact person, asking if I would like to join him for a sightseeing drive. He picked me up in his Landrover and we set out south of our headquarters building in Dhahran. We drove miles and miles through the desert, through endless sand dunes, finally arriving at a spot high up and overlooking the Gulf of Acaba. It was a glorious view, all that glistening blue green water in the midst of all that arid and featureless sand. As we sat there, I noticed a flotilla of large cargo vessels standing offshore. I asked my friend what those ships were carrying. He said, "Those are sand barges." I said, "Oh, I see. That certainly makes sense. You have plenty of sand to sell to other countries." "Sell!?!",

he replied, looking at me strangely. "Those ships aren't **taking** sand; they're **bringing** sand here. It's our third largest import." I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I said, "You have got to be kidding." All around us, everywhere, in all directions there was nothing BUT sand. "Why in the world would **you** be buying sand?" He then explained that the sand all around us, at least for construction purposes, was completely worthless. "This sand," he said, "has been here for centuries. It's been blown from one end of the continent to the other, time and time again. By now, it's had all its edges worn off. Its grains are smooth and polished. It flows like water. If you tried to make cement or mortar buildings would collapse. For strong buildings you need rough-edged sand from France."

Just in that same way, the early Christian Church needed some rough edged individuals of courage who were prepared to stand up and be counted. James and the other martyrs were not timid, careful, cautious individuals. They were "Sons of Thunder" who were ready and willing to lay down their lives if that what was needed in order to build a strong and enduring Faith.

Today we salute the "Sons of Thunder" who paid the price that the times required of them. Today we reflect on the challenges that confront us in our own day. Today we ask for the same courage that we see in the Apostle James. May we not be timid Christians who back away from living lives of principle, all too ready to forsake our beliefs if the going gets tough.

The bottom line for this Feast of the Apostle James is that we ask God's grace and strength to be Modern Mavericks—people willing to say what we think and to fight for the demands of love in a world that, all too often, sees the truth as too challenging to support by personal sacrifice. May we find in the example of James the strength to commit our own lives to make a positive difference on behalf of all those who are in-need or at-risk. These are the ones in whose service Jesus calls us, 'way back in Bible times and right now today.