

Reflecting on the Resurrection – St. James **‘Breakfast and the Bible’** **James 1:12-18**

We're in the Easter season, when we make a point of celebrating the Resurrection of Jesus. Admittedly we're doing so in a rather different way this year! It's good to be reminded that those first believers in Jesus were not meeting in grand purpose-built buildings but usually in their homes, in small groups. They were often in fear for their lives and well-being. Neither did they have the New Testament as we know it to help them understand what was going on. As the Church grew, however, key apostles started to write to the fledgling churches to help them become more familiar with the teachings of Jesus and how to apply them. Key amongst these were Peter, James, John and Paul. Indeed, their writings make up most of the New Testament. So let's see what each of them has to say as they reflected back on the momentous events of that first Easter.

We continue our mini-series with James. There are actually four people called James referred to in the Bible, but this is James the brother (or technically half-brother!) of Jesus. In Christian tradition, he is often called 'James the Just'. St. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15:6-7 (a key chapter on the resurrection of Jesus, which we will look at in a couple of weeks time) tells us, "...Jesus appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. *Then he appeared to James*, then to all the apostles..." When Paul had not long had his 'Damascus Road' conversion experience, the first of the apostles that he visited was James; "...I saw none of the other apostles—*only James, the Lord's brother*" (Galatians 1:19). Curiously, in his letter, James makes very little explicit reference to the resurrection. It is assumed as the backdrop to everything else. James' emphases lay elsewhere at the time of writing, in encouraging the followers of Jesus to put into practice what it means to be a people of the resurrection in the ebb and flow of daily life. Today, we will look at James 1:12-18.

James – the 'Lord's brother' and a 'servant' of Christ

Interestingly, James does not claim to be the brother of Jesus in his opening greeting but merely a 'servant' (literally 'slave') of Jesus. 1 Cor 15:7 tells us that he became a disciple of Jesus following a resurrection appearance. James is mentioned several times in Acts (e.g. 12:17 and 15:13) which tell us that he was a leader of the church in Jerusalem. Paul visited James on his last visit to Jerusalem (Acts 21:18) which might indicate the esteem in which Paul held him. James is mentioned several times in Paul's letter to the Galatians (probably the earliest of Paul's surviving letters): 1:19 (a key early meeting), 2:9 (describing him as a 'pillar' of the church), and 2:12 (where Paul is critical of James over the issue of the eating of non-kosher meat). James was martyred in AD62, so the letter is typically dated to sometime around AD60. However, it may be a lot earlier than that and could, in fact, be one of the earliest texts in the New Testament. We will never know for certain!

Background to James

The letter concentrates on putting flesh on the bones of describing what constitutes a Christian lifestyle. The letter is general – not sent to an individual congregation or context - but almost certainly was written with Jewish Christians in mind. Its terms and outlook are very Jewish, and it employs Old Testament imagery and spirit. The greeting of 1:1 is to 'the twelve tribes' and this is probably intended to signify the descendants of the OT twelve tribes who now follow the Messiah, but who have been spread (dispersed) as a result of the persecution which followed the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 8:1).

The main thrust of the letter is that real faith will result in Christ-like actions. While faith is the key to a saving relationship with God, through Jesus (a great theme in Paul's letters), James makes the point that any true faith will inevitably move us to act in a Christ-like way.

Indeed, Paul clearly believed the same since in Gal 5:6a he says, “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” James seems to take as read the major themes of the NT (that appear prominently in the Pauline writings), including the atoning death of Christ, and then his resurrection. Indeed, the name of ‘Jesus’ is only mentioned twice (1:1 and 2:1). That said, James does describe Jesus as ‘glorious’ (hence clearly affirming the resurrection) and speaks several times of the coming again of Jesus at the end of time.

James 1:12-18

Verses 12-15

- James is writing to followers of Jesus who are going through trials for their faith – see James 1:3. This is telling in itself and compelling evidence for the truth of the physical resurrection of Jesus. If those early followers were aware that the whole resurrection narrative was fabricated then they surely would not have been willing to endure suffering, or even martyrdom, for a false cause. This is a strong argument to refute those who have contended that the disciples of Jesus removed his body from the tomb and then circulated fabricated claims that Jesus had risen.
- Like Peter speaking of true faith being refined as in fire (1 Peter 1:7), James talks of ‘standing the test’ (12) so that we will receive ‘the crown of life’ – just as Jesus endured the cross and now is enthroned as King in heaven (see e.g. Philippians 2:9-11 and Revelation 5:12). The ‘crown’ he has in mind may be a royal crown but is more likely to be the laurel wreath worn by victorious athletes (see 1 Cor. 9:25) and figuratively signifies glory and honour. The reward is not some fading thing, like a wreath, but eternal life – the enjoyment of God’s presence for ever. In Revelation 2:10, the risen Jesus speaks through the pen of John the Apostle to suffering Christians in Smyrna (in modern-day Turkey), “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”
- God does not tempt (13) but he does allow us to be tested on occasions. Famously he tested Abraham over his willingness to yield up his only Son to God, and test his obedience (Genesis 22:1ff). It is reading that we always have in our liturgies of Holy Week, as we remember that God, in a sense, put himself to the test, by showing his willingness to allow his own Son to die for the sake of the salvation of all humanity.

Verses 16-18

- When we do ‘good things’ as we seek to live out our Easter faith, we should be aware that these have their source in the risen Jesus. It is his Holy Spirit that prompts and enables this. On the night before he died, Jesus told his disciples that, after he had gone, he would send the Holy Spirit to them who would teach, guide and protect them. He would motivate them to do “the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father” (John 14:12). He is probably indicating that his believers will be able to take the Easter message to the whole world, in a way that the human Jesus physically was unable to do.
- We are to be the ‘first fruits of his creatures’ (18), a wonderful phrase which has resonances with other NT references (see e.g. Eph. 1:13 and Col. 1:5). The ‘word of truth’ refers to the Gospel – the good news of the resurrection. Just as Peter speaks of us being given new birth by the resurrection (1 Pet. 1:3), so James assumes this as under-pinning of all that God seeks to do in and through us, and all the ‘good gifts’ he wishes to lavish upon us. Truly, that is what it means to be ‘Easter People’ in deeds as well as words as we respond in lives of worship to “our glorious Jesus Christ”!

In the words of an Easter song:

One with the Father, Ancient of Days,

through the Spirit who clothes faith with certainty.

Honour and blessing, glory and praise to the King crowned with pow'r and authority!

And we are raised with Him, death is dead, love has won, Christ has conquered;

And we shall reign with Him, for He lives: Christ is risen from the dead!