

July 25, 2021

The Festival of St. James the Elder

Text: Romans 8:28-39; Mark 10:35-45

Romans 8:28 is one of the most comforting verses in the Bible. There, we hear, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.”

This promise from our Lord, that all things work together for good, is an anchor of hope and peace in the midst of the world’s troubles.

However, this verse doesn’t only apply to the world outside us. It applies inwardly as well, to each of us individually.

It’s not only the world outside that God turns to good, but perhaps even better, God also turns us to good, calling us according to His purpose.

St. James the Elder, whom we remember today, gives us a great example of what this looks like. The joy of learning about those saints who’ve gone before us is to see that they weren’t righteous and holy people in and of themselves, but were sinners whom Jesus transformed through His grace and then used to proclaim that grace to others.

When we think about James, especially hearing about him being killed by Herod in our reading from Acts, we might say his martyrdom is where Romans 8 applies to him. James gets his head cut off, but God turns that to good, both by giving an example of faithfulness to the Church and by bringing James into eternal rest.

And this is true! But there’s much more, especially if we look at James himself.

If we consider James in our Gospel reading, we can see that even as Jesus’ disciple – and one of the inner circle along with Peter and John – James struggles with sin, especially the sin of pride.

James sees himself as worthy to sit at Jesus’ right hand in the kingdom, ahead of any of the other disciples, Old Testament saints, anybody.

When Jesus’ poses a question to try to get James to stop and think, asking him if he’ll be able to drink the cup that He’ll have to drink, James doesn’t even blink. Of course he can do that! Quite the reply, considering James has no idea what that cup is!

Elsewhere, James and his brother John offer to call down fire from heaven on a village that has rejected Jesus. Because they can do that, you know?

You can see why the other disciples might have been just a touch indignant with James. Who does this guy think he is?

Or perhaps we might ask, how can Jesus use someone like this? With all this pride and self-centeredness, how can a person like that be turned to good?

To answer, we look to the following verses in Romans 8. In them, we read that God has predestined people like James, chosen them to be His from before the foundation of the world. And He chose them, as we read, “to be conformed to the image of His Son.”

James would be conformed, molded, shaped, changed, so that He would be a picture of Jesus. And it would be God who would do all this to James.

Hear again the following verse, verse 30: “And those whom He predestined He also called, and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified.”

Over and over, it is God who is doing the action, not man. James was a prideful man, but God would change him into something else.

Jesus would tell James, and all the disciples, that “whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.” Greatness in the Kingdom of God is found in humility and service, not displays of power and authority.

Jesus is the highest and best example of this. He also told James and the others that “even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.”

As James would see, this wasn’t just talk. He would watch as Jesus, the Son of Man, gave His life as a ransom.

He would see the One who commanded wind and waves be arrested by weak and sinful men.

He would hear that His master, who rebuked demons, was mocked by priests and scribes.

He would watch his Lord, who was glorified on top of the mount of Transfiguration and proclaimed the Son by the booming voice of the Father, be lifted up on the mount of Golgotha, with only a mocking placard proclaiming Him as “King of the Jews.”

And through the blood shed on the cross, even the pride of James would be washed away, forgiven before God’s throne in heaven.

In place of the sin of pride, God the Holy Spirit would grant its righteous equivalent: boldness.

The risen Jesus would appear to James and the others in the locked room on Easter evening and proclaim to them, “Peace be with you!” James stood absolved, freed from sin.

And then Jesus would commission him and the others, telling them that as the Father had sent Him, so He was sending them into the whole world to proclaim the Gospel.

And proclaim they did. James and the others stood boldly in the temple, proclaiming to all who would hear that Jesus was the Christ.

The high priest would throw them all in jail, but the angel of the Lord would free them, and again they’d go right back to sounding forth the Gospel.

This boldness, I would guess, is part of what made James the first of the Twelve to die for the Lord. James would not hide from the agents of Herod; he would not back down when questioned about who it was he served. He would go boldly to the executioner’s chamber, not afraid of what the sword would do.

For you see, James had been conformed to the image of Jesus. He was made to be a reflection, a picture of his Lord.

Jesus had proclaimed the Good News; James had proclaimed the Good News.

Jesus was killed by evil men; James would be killed by evil men.

And as Jesus had risen from the grave, never to die again, so too James knew that he would be raised from the dead.

His confidence was no longer in himself, but in the one who had died and had risen for him. James knew what Paul would later write to the Romans, that God turns all things, even sinners, to good.

This is true for us today as well. We often read Romans 8:28 and look around us, applying God's promise to the world outside, trusting that God will turn even the madness of nations and cultures to the good of His people. And that's true!

But as with James, we need to apply this promise of God inwardly, to ourselves, as well. We are all sinners, every one of us. And not just in some abstract sense.

We all do things, say things, think things that are contrary to the will and word of God. And when we think that, "well, at least I'm not as bad as so-and-so," we're committing the sin which had ensnared James: pride.

Satan also loves to take our sins and try to hold them against us, accuse our consciences and make us doubt our salvation.

Can God really use a sinner like you?

Can God really love you after what you've done or said or thought?

Will you really be able to stand up under persecution and confess the faith?

In these moments, we can read the words of Romans and think of James and all the saints who've gone before. If God can – and did – turn James, and Peter, and Paul, and everyone else in heaven to good, then He can – and does – do the same to you.

You Christians have all been chosen by God – predestined – before you even existed.

God called you out of darkness and sin by the power of His Word and the water of Holy Baptism.

By the blood of Jesus shed for you, God has forgiven you all your sins, justifying you, declaring you to be righteous in His sight.

And God the Holy Spirit has seen fit to come dwell within you, the glory, the presence of God, in you.

All of this is God's doing, everything from beginning to end. Our sinful pride, like that of James, wants to claim some of this for ourselves, say that we in some way contribute to our salvation. But the Word of God simply doesn't allow for this.

And this is a good thing! With that prideful focus on what we do crushed by the Word, we are free to be bold in Christ, to boast in Christ.

You don't have to worry about whether or not you made a sincere decision for Christ; Christ chose you!

You don't have to worry about whether you've done enough good to earn your salvation; the Father credits you with Jesus' perfect righteousness purely out of His grace and mercy.

You don't have to worry when Satan tries to put doubts before you, You can boast that Christ has done everything!

You can boldly speak the words Paul wrote in our Epistle: “He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things?”

The Father loves you so much that He gave His Son over to death for you; whatever is best for you in this life, the Father will give it to you!

This doesn't mean pleasure and worldly happiness, because remember, you and I are being conformed to the image of Christ. As Christ suffered, even unjustly, you and I will suffer, even unjustly.

But that's okay! God turns suffering for good, strengthening our faith, destroying our idols, making us look to Him and Him alone for everything. As we are conformed into images of the Son, we then provide a witness to Him for the unbelieving world to see.

St. James was turned to love God, called according the purpose which God had already set for Him from the foundation of the world.

He was conformed to the image of Christ, his pride made to be godly boldness, even in the face of Herod's sword. He knew that everything was in Christ's hands, and that His Lord had already ransomed him from the power of death and hell.

We are blessed to follow in the footsteps of James and all the saints. We know that everything is in Christ's nail-scarred hands, both the world and our very souls.

We can face whatever may come with boldness, because our Lord has predestined us, called us, and justified us, and on the Last Day He will glorify us in the resurrection.

In Jesus' name, amen.