

The Vigil of the Festival of St. James the Elder, Apostle and Martyr
St. Matthew 20:20-28
July 24th, 2020
Sts. Peter & Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church, UAC
Simpsonville, SC
Pastor Jerald Dulas

To Give His Life a Ransom for Many

In Nomine Iesu!

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Prayer in Pulpit before Sermon:

O Lord, send out Thy Light and Thy Truth, let them lead us. O Lord, open Thou my lips, that my mouth may show forth Thy praise. O Lord, graciously preserve me, lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be rejected. Amen.

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior + Jesus Christ. Amen.

Some might think that we are celebrating the Festival of St. James the Elder, Apostle and Martyr a day too early. After all, his festival falls on July 25th and not today. But, like all the Festival of Christ, the festivals for all the Apostles are celebrated with what is known as a “Double Vespers.” Remember that in the Church’s year the day begins in the evening and goes through the next day. Just as Moses in his first book, commonly called Genesis, describes the creation: “there was evening and morning the...day.” Even so as each day is counted from evening to evening, on the festivals of the Christ and on the festivals of the Apostles the celebration extends into the following evening, that is, the following Vespers. Hence the term “double Vespers,” for their festivals are celebrated over the course of two evenings—two Vespers. Therefore, it is right and proper that we celebrate this festival of St. James the Elder on this evening.

He is referred to as “the Elder” or “the Greater” not because he is more important than the other Apostle who is called St. James (who has the unfortunate appellation of “the Less”), but because he holds the honor of being the first Apostle martyred for his confession of the Lord + Jesus Christ. This is why the color of the day is the color red, as a symbol for the blood of the martyrs. The church is decked out in the blood of martyrs. The ministers are covered in the blood of the martyrs, for their blood is a reflection of the Blood of Christ that is poured out on the tree of the holy cross for the sins of the whole world, so that those who believe on Him might be justified. Their blood bears witness to the sacrifice of the Christ. For even in the face of the fear of death they remained steadfast to the Lord + Jesus. We give the saints honor for their faithfulness even unto death. It is an example to us of how we should remain faithful even amidst persecution and the fear of death.

St. James the Elder was the first of the Apostles to join our Lord + Jesus in Heaven after King Herod had him “killed with the sword.” All the other Apostles would join him in death by martyrdom. The only exception would be his brother St. John, who died on the island of Patmos in exile. All of the Apostles remained faithful to the Lord + Jesus and His teachings even unto death. This is why it is referred to as the “doctrine of the Apostles” for they were the ones who took the teachings of the Lord + Jesus which they had been taught over the course of three years and preached the Lord’s teachings to the whole world, beginning at Jerusalem.

Therefore, St. James the Elder, whose festival we celebrate today, is honored among us as the

first of the Apostles martyred for the faith. With this honor it would seem prudent to us that the Gospel reading appointed for today would reflect the faithful character of St. James the Elder. The Gospel reading from the Apostle and Evangelist St. Matthew, however, shows us just how flawed St. James the Elder is. We are presented with a Gospel on his festival day which shows how human he is; how full of sin he is. For the mother of Zebedee's sons—Sts. James and John—comes to the Lord + Jesus on her knees to ask for a position of honor and authority in the Kingdom of God.

I had mentioned in a few sermons during the Lenten season how the Apostles were always arguing about who was the greatest. Even on the night of the Lord's arrest and trial they were arguing amongst themselves about who should be doing the washing of the feet of the others. Here we see in this pericope that as our Lord + Jesus prepares to go to the cross and death, the Apostles (and in this case the mother of two of the Apostles) were fighting over their proper place at the table of the Lord. Who gets the place of honor? Who sits in the seat of honor on the right hand and the left? Clearly, they do not fully understand what is awaiting our Lord + Jesus in Jerusalem. He will indeed become the Victor and Ruler, but His victory will come through suffering and death. His rule will be from the right hand of God the Father, not in the palaces of Jerusalem.

Our Lord + Jesus comes to secure a Kingdom through suffering and death; to give His life as a ransom for many. It is not to rule over the Earth in the way that the Jews and the Apostles thought at that time. His Kingdom is not an earthly kingdom, but a spiritual and eternal kingdom. Therefore, to sit on His right hand and His left in His kingdom is not something that can be granted without drinking the cup that He is about to drink, nor without being baptized with the baptism He is about to be baptized. The honor of sitting on twelve thrones and ruling with the Lord + Jesus in Heaven, comes through suffering and death.

This is the wages of sin for us. Death is the wage we all must pay on account of our sinfulness. It is the wage that all of the Apostles paid, who all paid, except for St. John, with martyrdom; by having their blood spilled for their faithfulness to the teachings of the Lord + Jesus. We learn from the teachings of the Apostles—the teachings of the Lord + Jesus—that we deserve the Lord God's eternal wrath and displeasure on account of our sinfulness, as does the whole world. But we also learn from our Lord and Savior that it is His Blood that was offered as a ransom for many that gives to all who believe on Him the gift of eternal life with Him. His Blood, the cup which He drank and the baptism with which He was baptized with, satisfies the wrath and anger of the heavenly Father. He earned the rule of His Kingdom with His suffering, shed Blood, and death. And He gives us the benefits of the victory that He won for us freely for the sake of grace; purely because He loves us His creation.

As St. Paul wrote in the Epistle reading to the Church at Rome, our heavenly Father, and His Son, our Lord + Jesus love us so much that the Father willingly sends His Son + Jesus to suffer and die for us, and the Son willingly drinks of the cup prepared for Him and endures the baptism with which He is to be baptized with so that we might be called "sons of God." Therefore, nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ + Jesus. No pain or fear of death can harm us. For as our Lord + Jesus suffered and died for us on the tree of the holy cross and won for us a place in His Kingdom, we have also been baptized into His death through the waters of Holy Baptism. We are washed with water and cleansed of all of our sin, and made worthy by the work of the Holy Ghost to sit at the table with the Lord + Jesus in His Kingdom.

We also drink the cup of our Lord's Blood spilled for us when we come this holy altar and receive His Body and Blood in bread and wine. He cleanses our souls. He heals our sin-sick souls with His Body and Blood that He gave and shed on the tree of the holy cross when He offered up His life as a ransom for many. He came to not to be served, but to serve. He came to give, not to take. His Kingdom is in Heaven, not on Earth. Therefore, just as He comes to be a servant to all, the Apostles would also learn to be servants and not rulers. St. James the Elder, and his brother St. John have their mother

come to the Lord + Jesus and request that they have a place of honor in the Lord's Kingdom. All the other Apostles also wanted this same honor, as they all become indignant toward the sons of Zebedee.

They would learn what being a member of the Kingdom of the Lord + Jesus would entail. Our Lord + Jesus leads the way in showing them that their life would be full of suffering and shame and death, because the devil, the world and man's sinful flesh does not want the Kingdom of our Lord + Jesus to be established in this world. St. James the Elder would lead the other Apostles into death by being killed with the sword by King Herod. He would gain the crown of eternal life first. He would receive His reward before all the other Apostles, even his own brother who would come last of all. St. James the Elder and his brother St. John would become the book ends of the martyrdoms of the Apostles; one would be on the left and one on the right; one at the beginning and one at the end.

In spite of their flawed, sinful nature. Even though they were human and had human trials and tribulations throughout their lives. They remained faithful even unto death. For they knew, even as St. Paul wrote to the Church at Rome, that nothing can separate them from the love of God that is in Christ + Jesus, for He came to give His life as a ransom for many. He came to give His life as a ransom for us, poor, miserable sinners, who are highly flawed, and endure many human trials and tribulations.

The good news for us is that just as the Apostles—just as St. James the Elder—remained faithful unto death and received the crown of life, we too have this promise of an eternal life with our Lord and Savior + Jesus Christ. They faced numerous persecutions. We in this place do not face the persecutions that many Christians in countries that are ruled by those who worship false gods do. We do not live with the constant fear of death for our confession of the faith. But we still have many things in our society that seek to draw us away from the Word of God; that seek to draw us into trusting in our works and station in life. We are constantly led by this world either into sadness and despair, or pride and self-righteousness.

We need not fear. There is no sickness or death, no pain or persecution that can separate us from the love of God in Christ + Jesus. For out of His great love for us and for His heavenly Father, He came down from Heaven to serve us by offering up His life as a ransom for many. Therefore, my dear friends, as we celebrate this festival tonight decked out in the color of red, let us remember the Blood that was shed for our redemption. We have been covered with the Blood of the Christ. It speaks to us in a still small voice, that even in the midst of persecution, sickness, death, and the like, the Lord + Jesus sits on the right hand of the heavenly Father interceding for us and all Christians. Our Lord + Jesus sits on the heavenly throne and preserves His Church by sending us His ministers, just as He sent the Apostles into the world, who remind us that even though we are poor, miserable sinners, He has come to grant us grace by giving up His life as a ransom for many, especially those of us who believe on His Name. In the Name of our Lord + Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prayer in Pulpit after Sermon:

Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy Name give glory! I will extol Thee, O Lord, and I will praise Thy Name forever and ever. Amen.

The Votum:

The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!