
It's Amazing What a Difference the Resurrection Makes: A Tribute to St. James of Jerusalem

**An Evensong meditation by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
The Feast of St. James of Jerusalem**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart find favor in your sight, oh Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Well, what a difference the resurrection makes.

Here we have Jesus, in the Gospel of Matthew, coming back to his hometown, presenting his wisdom, his judgment to be rejected. "Who is this?" they say. Isn't this Joseph's son? Isn't this James' brother? What authority does he have?"

And then we have the reading from Acts, which is in chapter 15. We've now gone five chapters of problems the church has been forced to solve. And with the big problem: are Gentiles going to have to comply with the law, all of the responsibilities and obligations that make Jews, Jews, that are very important to the church in Jerusalem? Are these new converts that Paul has brought to the church, are they going to have to do the things that make us special?

"No," James says. While a little bit different from our translation, I like this one: "My judgment is that we should impose no irksome restrictions on those Gentiles who are turning to God." No irksome restrictions.

What a difference the resurrection makes. Jesus can't get anybody to listen to him, and James changes the whole future of the church by being decisive, acting out of his experience, making a decision.

What's happened between the rejection of Jesus and the acceptance of James? I tried to get your attention by signaling the resurrection, but really what's happened, I think, is Pentecost has happened. The Holy Spirit has come. The love of Jesus and his father has touched those disciples and apostles, creating a church. And where the Holy Spirit goes, miracles follow. This is literally true. If you look throughout the New Testament to where the Holy Spirit appears, I think you will find a miracle is not far behind.

But what's the miracle here? I think the miracle here is two things. One, righteousness, and the second, holiness. Or if you will, righteousness being in right relationship with your neighbor, loving your neighbor as yourself, and holiness being in right relationship with God.

Now, these terms were defined before by reference to the law. That's what the law is. It's all of the ways that holiness and righteousness are described. But now, with the Holy Spirit, we have a different focus. Paul says, "Jesus is the end of the law," which is not to say the law is no longer relevant. It is to say Jesus is the purpose. Holiness and righteousness defined in a new way by the presence of the Spirit, by the experience that we have of God in and through each other.

This is what the church is: living life together. I have two more pedestrian examples of this, but I hope they will help.

The first occurred at a dinner party. We were dining with hosts who were a bit more conservative than we are and love to talk about politics. The inevitable moment came when the political subject was gently introduced, and my wife said very decisively, "Before we begin, I want you to know that I'm a Marxist."

Well, that stopped the conversation. I didn't know she was a Marxist. I don't think she is a Marxist. I think what she was signaling is, unless this conversation is intended to be broad-hearted and minded enough to include even that, we shouldn't have it. Unless you are willing to listen to even that, we shouldn't talk. Because we are bound together by our baptism. We are bound together by our faith. We are bound together by our commitment to love each other. We can talk about politics. I love to talk about politics. But it needs to be with a willingness to listen, really listen to others.

We had a wonderful night that night. We avoided what was certain disaster just because she focused us, with a little guile, mind you, on the purpose of our being there, so that we didn't get sidelined into those other conversations. Righteousness is about being in right relationship with people and experiencing the willingness to be together no matter what they have to say.

The second, I think, is my wife's insistence — I did not tell her I was going to preach about her, by the way, so don't mention it to her — her insistence on what she calls charitable reading, which is to say, no matter what the other person has just done, before you render a judgment, you have to come up with at least three reasons why it might be reasonable. This is hard work.

Three reasons why what was just said or done might be reasonable. The lesson there is that we are going to get to the truth of another person that we are committed to love. We cannot be sidetracked by our own tendency to find fault with the intentions we believe they had with whatever we didn't like they're doing. Does that make sense? We are quick, I think, at least I am, to believe, based on what you did, that you have some malevolent intent.

And by the way, if politics are involved, this happens even faster. But this commitment to charitable reading will change how you see and engage another person, simply by demanding that you look for, in good faith, the truth of that other person. Righteousness is about being in right relationship with others. Holiness is about being in right relationship with God. But it happens not just in church, but also in our very pedestrian, ordinary engagements with each other, if we're paying attention.

James, I think, was paying attention. He was, in many ways, giving up his power, his authority, much of what made the Jerusalem church the head of the burgeoning Christian world, because the welfare of the group demanded it. Because his charitable read of Paul and Barnabas allowed him to do it, because his commitment to righteousness and holiness changed the church forever.

It was after this Jerusalem council that Antioch began to emerge as the new center of the church. Jerusalem remained the symbolic center, in many ways. But the life of the church, in many ways, went to Antioch because James, motivated, I believe, by the spirit, in many ways yielded to the miracle of righteousness and holiness, realizing the purpose of the community was being together, and he could lighten up on the rules which previously formed their identity. And that the charitable reading of others allowed him, maybe compelled him, to give Paul the authority that Paul needed from the Jerusalem church.

It's amazing what a difference the resurrection makes, moving from Jesus being rejected by his hometown to James changing the whole nature of the church because of his experience of the Spirit. It's a good day to celebrate James.

Amen.