St James Revd Sarah

It has always struck me as a bit odd that on a saint’s day, when we might be expected to remember their great triumphs and spiritual holiness, we tend to recall the stories of their greatest blunders. On the feast day of St Thomas, we recall how he doubted the resurrection of Christ. Today, we focus on a rather embarrassing moment when the (nameless) mother of James and John approaches Jesus to ask a favour. Her request is that Jesus places her sons at his left and right hand in his kingdom. Given that Jesus himself sits at God’s right hand, this is quite an ask! When Jesus addresses his next question to the two brothers, it is clear that the request has actually come from them.

The rest of the disciples are understandably indignant at this request, yet Jesus is concerned with their lack of understanding at a deeper level. They have clearly missed a central part of his ministry, which is to refocus their attention, not on status and worldly authority, but on serving God, even if it means giving up everything else including one’s own life. Just like the man who sold everything he had in order to gain the pearl of great price: God’s kingdom is such treasure that other things can pass through our hands. This kingdom stands on God’s authority in contrast with the kingdom of earth.

St Paul describes us as clay jars which hold God’s treasure. Everyday people living everyday lives. A bit of fancy detail here, that nasty knock from a while ago, a few cracks and scuffs too. Most of us are all too aware of our imperfections. The mass of ways in which we fail to live up to our own standards, let alone those of God. Perhaps we see ourselves as a bit ordinary, everyday, and flawed. Yet God sees our value and shares his treasure with us. Even with James, flawed as he was; even with us.

From the power struggles of James and John, the lectionary swoops us forward to the early church. Here we see the prophets gathered together to seek God’s will. A prophet, Agabus, has heard God’s warning that a famine will take place, particularly affecting the church in Judea. Given the struggles they are facing, a decision is made to support those Christians and coordinate some aid. They trust this task to Saul, who has not yet been renamed Paul. He is another clay jar, shining with the radiance of God’s transforming power. This account of church unity is in stark contrast to the following sentence about the shocking and violent death of James: the first martyr of the disciples.

What we see in the life of St James is an ordinary man who had ordinary desires for recognition and who lived to see extraordinary things. He was present with Peter and his brother John at the transfiguration of Christ and at the raising of Jairus’ daughter. One of the inner circle; yet one of the first to die.

As Christians we see life in all its struggles and joys through the eyes of faith, so we see death differently too. Paul assures us that the ‘mini deaths’ of trial and tribulation may form places where the light can shine through for others. I am not trivialising suffering which can anything but life-giving, but recognising the presence of the light of Christ in our darkest times. St Paul speaks of facing death knowing that the God who raised Jesus will raise us also. It is this hope in God’s saving love, that allows us to let go of our craving for status and power, and turn our focus to the light and life of Christ.

Perhaps this week we can pay attention to those times when we feel that we are a bit ordinary, flawed or mundane, we can focus instead on the treasure of God, the Christ-light and the Holy Spirit shining through us by God’s mercy, grace and love, and give thanks.