

Feast of ss. Phillip and James

Sermon by Rev'd Steve McMahon

When people are asked to name the apostles, the majority will get one or two. Judas Iscariot and Peter are commonly named. Those who have a little knowledge may get a few more, Andrew, Doubting Thomas, James and John. But it usually stops about there – few will be able to tell you anything about some of the rest of the Twelve. Philip and James (usually called "James the Less" to distinguish him from the other James) fall into this category, and that is not really surprising because we know so very little about them. They appear in the lists of names of the Twelve but there is precious little else.

Mark records someone who may have been James as a witness of the crucifixion but that's about all. Philip, is mentioned on a number of occasions, but none so important as that recorded in one particular Gospel reading: John 14: 6-14. Let's set the scene.

The apostles are a bit full of themselves. There are constant arguments regarding which is the greatest. Two have had their mum come and ask Jesus to promote her sons to the top of the ladder. And today, Phillip challenges Jesus with a question that he must have known had no answer. "Show us the Father."

Now let's look at what that question really means. To the learned in society God was the unknowable, the invisible, the impossible to describe. The Jews would have counted it an article of faith that no-one had seen God at any time. It was to those people that Jesus said, "If you had known me, then you would know the father too." And it was at precisely that moment that Philip decided to chirp up and ask to see the Father. No doubt he, and those standing alongside, realised that he was asking for the impossible. Perhaps he was harking back to the times when God had appeared in glory to Moses as we read in the account of the Exodus. But, even then, God had stopped short and revealed only his back to Moses, keeping his face hidden. By the time Jesus was walking the earth, men had begin to think that God was a long way off. The Roman rule and oppression led to a picture of doom and gloom in which God was seen as something very different and very distant. "Show us the Father," Philip urged – we can almost hear the sarcasm in his voice as we listen to the Gospel.

And then Jesus plants the metaphorical left hook, "He who has seen me has seen the Father".

To see Jesus is to see what God is really like. God is someone who cares, who loves, who takes delight in his creation. Patient, warm nurturing. Jesus didn't turn around and say "You stupid idiot" when his disciples asked him ludicrous questions. Instead he answered them as fully and truthfully as possible. Many people have told the truth, but Jesus is the only person who ever embodied it. Many moral teachers have taught the truth, but only Jesus could declare, "I am the truth".

So what was it that inspired Philip to ask this question that elicited probably the most shocking words Jesus ever uttered? Remember the disciples were constantly striving for one-upmanship. It is possible that Philip was trying to score points off the other apostles by showing how clever he was, in asking a question that Jesus would have no answer for. He'd become a bit too cocky for his own good and, needed taking down a peg or two.

But we shouldn't be too harsh on them. After all, they are only as human as the rest of us. It's a common human trait to have a big opinion of yourself and, in some ways, it's a good thing since we perform better when we are confident. But if it gets taken to extremes that self-confidence can become egotism which is an annoyance. And yet, we do love our own little ego trip. The knowledge that we are better than anyone else. We know that we're more intelligent than others, more talented, more skilful – really, it's amazing other people don't recognise our genius. Of course I'm not saying this to you personally – but to the person sitting next to you. Or am I?

Jesus message is clear for us all. We all, at some time, put ourselves ahead of others. But we are all loved equally. Jesus showed us that we are all equal by dying for each one of us. And in doing so showed us the true nature of God the Father, a God of love who suffers for each one of us, no matter who we might think we are.