SAINT JAMES THE GREATER, Apostle

FEAST DAY: July 25th

CANONIZED A SAINT:
Proclaimed a Saint by Popular Acclaim upon his martyrdom in the year 44.

PATRONAGE: Pilgrims

PRAYER
Almighty Father,
by the martyrdom of Saint James
you blessed the work of the early Church.
May his profession of faith give us courage
and his prayers bring us strength.
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ,
your Son, who lives and reigns with you and
the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever.

SCRIPTURE READING
A reading from the Holy Gospel according to Saint Matthew
As he was walking along the Sea of Galilee he watched two brothers, Simon known as Peter and his brother Andrew, casting a net into the sea. They were fisherman. He said to them, “Come after me and I will make you fishers of men.” They immediately abandoned their nets and became his followers. He walked along farther and caught sight of two brothers, James, Zebedee’s son, and his brother John. They too were in their boat, getting their nets in order with their father, Zebedee. He called them and immediately they abandoned boat and father to follow him.
~Matthew 4: 18-22

OUTLINE OF TEACHING
Saint James, son of Zebedee and brother of Saint John the apostle, was born at Bethsaida. James was present at most of the miracles performed by Jesus and became the first apostle to suffer martyrdom in 44. According to tradition, James preached the Gospel in Spain before returning to Jerusalem where he would be
martyred. He is often portrayed with a sword or a pilgrim’s staff. He is honored in Compostella, Spain where there is a glorious church dedicated in his honor.

SAINT JAMES THE GREATER, APOSTLE

INTRODUCTION

It is safe to say that there could be a bit of confusion about Saint James, the Apostle, as there are in fact two apostles named James. One of them wrote the Epistle of Saint James. The question is which one. The church distinguishes the two apostles named James by referring to one as “The Greater” and the other, “The Lesser.” We are going to look at the life of Saint James “The Greater” who was not author the Epistle.

In enormous sized niches in the Basilica of Saint John Lateran in Rome (the Pope’s Cathedral Church), stand gargantuan marble statues of each of the twelve Apostles, holding a significant symbol of either their life or martyrdom. Saint James the Apostle, known in the church as “The Greater” to distinguish him from the other apostle named James (known as “The Lesser”), is depicted holding, not the instrument of his martyrdom but a pilgrim’s staff. Saint James certainly happened upon a very long journey at the invitation of Jesus, that would culminate in his own martyrdom in Jerusalem in the year, 44. Let us journey together as we discover this most dynamic of Apostles, Saint James, the Greater. Although we are focusing on the life of Saint James, you will see how inseparable he is from his brother Saint John the Apostle and even his fellow Galilean, Saint Peter.

The Call of Jesus

There is precious little detail of the life of Saint James until he is actually called by Christ to be one of his followers. What we know of Saint James after his call by Jesus portrays a man who was every bit as rugged and impetuous as his fellow Galilean, Saint Peter. According to Matthew’s Gospel (4: 18 – 22) Saint James was the son of Zebedee and the older brother of Saint John the Apostle (the author of the Gospel of John, the three Epistles and the book of Revelation). They were fishermen by trade as was Saint Peter and his brother Saint Andrew. Jesus first called upon Peter and Andrew to follow him and then not long after, as they were preparing their nets in their boat, called James and John to follow him as well. In the days of Peter and Andrew, James and John, fishing was a very difficult and physically demanding task. Exposure to the various elements of nature, rowing boats, at times with the wind bearing down, hauling in course nets full of fish, called for very strong, rugged bodies. These same trying conditions could easily wear down a man in regards to his disposition. It seem that James and his brother John had as much impetuosity as did Saint Peter, yet these slight character flaws seem to be overlooked just a bit.
It is very possible that James and John had known of Jesus long before his call to them. Possibly through conversing with Peter, their townsmen and through other people who may have heard Jesus preach, James and John could have certainly come to the belief early on that Jesus was the Christ. This would be the only possible reason that they so quickly, upon hearing the call of Jesus to follow him, quit all things pertaining to their father and their profession to answer his call.

**“Sons of Thunder”**

As stated above, James and John, at least early on had very impetuous and at times fiery dispositions. Take for example the time that Jesus and his disciples were headed to Jerusalem, by way of a Samaritan town. Jesus sent messengers ahead to the Samaritan town to prepare for his passing through. The Samaritans would not welcome Jesus, as he was on his way to Jerusalem. The Gospel according to Luke (9: 54 – 55) records James and John asking Jesus; “Lord, would you not have us call down fire from heaven to destroy them?” Jesus would later rebuke them for this request. Another example of the far-flung attitude of James and John also comes to us from the Gospels. In Matthew’s Gospel (20: 20 – 24) it is recorded that the mother of James and John, who traditionally has been known as Salome, with her two sons in tow asks Jesus to make her the promise that these sons of hers will sit “one at your right hand and the other at your left when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus responded by asking if they were prepared to drink from the cup (of suffering) that he was to drink. Without missing a beat, they both responded that they could. Jesus assured them that they would indeed drink from the cup of suffering. Although John is the only apostle to not suffer martyrdom, he would indeed suffer other difficulties, while his brother James would be the first of Jesus’ apostles to suffer martyrdom.

Jesus does not let these minor character flaws interfere with his mission or his use of James and John. As a matter of fact he gives them the nickname, “Sons of Thunder.” Jesus recognizes their fire and passion as he bestows this nickname of affection upon the two brothers. (See Mark 3: 17).

**Witnesses to some of the most significant and miraculous events**

Both James and John are listed prominently with the Twelve Apostles, usually right after Peter and Andrew. They, along with Saint Peter were present with Jesus during some of the most dramatic and miraculous times of his ministry. Both are present when Jesus cures Peter’s mother in-law (Mark 1: 29 – 31) as well as witness’s to the healing of Jairus’ daughter (Mark 5: 37 and Luke 8: 51. James and John, along with Peter were with Jesus during one of the most significant events prior to his Passion, which was certainly a foretaste of the Resurrection. As Matthew (17: 1), Mark (9: 2) and Luke (9: 28) explain in their respective Gospels, Jesus took Peter, James and his brother John with him to Mount Tabor where he is transfigured before them. While speaking with Moses and Elijah, Jesus’ face and garments became as dazzling white. During this time a bright cloud overshadowed them and they heard a voice from heaven say “This is my beloved Son on whom my favor rests. Listen to him.” (Matthew 17: 5). Certainly this event was intended to strengthen them during what would be the darkest time for Jesus as well as the
Twelve, to which they were also witnesses. From the highest heights spiritually at the Transfiguration to the darkest possible time in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus asks Peter, James and his brother John to stay awake and pray with him. On the two occasions prior to his arrest, Jesus finds the apostles heavy with sleep (Matthew 26: 37 and Mark 14: 33).

**Missionary to Spain?**

According to various legends and traditions in Spain, it is claimed that Saint James, after Pentecost journeyed to that country as a missionary. Unfortunately, the earliest account of Saint James missionary activities didn’t appear until the seventh century. Also, there are no accounts from the earliest of Christian writers that Saint James ever preached in Spain. There is further evidence against James ever having gone to Spain in Saint Paul’s letter to the Romans (25: 20 – 24). With all of this said, it is unknown why and how Saint James became so connected to the country of Spain. It is however known and believed that the remains of Saint James lie in the Cathedral of Compostela, a fact referred to and authenticated in a papal bull of Pope Leo XIII dating back to 1884. Because of the long standing tradition that Saint James did indeed preach in Spain, he is the patron saint of Pilgrims and thus is depicted carrying a pilgrims’ staff.

**First Apostle to be martyred**

If there seems to be a bit of confusion over the missionary activities of Saint James, there is no confusion about his martyrdom. Saint James was the first of Jesus’ Twelve Apostles to suffer death for his faith. It is safe to believe that Saint James brought to his preaching the same fire and passion that earned him the nickname along with his brother John, “Sons of Thunder.” It is probably this same fire and passion that led to his martyrdom in 44. at the hands of Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of King Herod the Great, who was responsible for the death of the Holy Innocents, as recorded in the Gospel of Saint Matthew (2: 16). In the book of Acts (12: 1 – 3) we read; “During that period, King Herod started to harass some of the members of the church. He beheaded James, the brother of John, and saw that this pleased certain of the Jews, he took Peter into custody too. We also read later in the book of Acts (12: 22 – 23) that King Herod was struck down and killed by an angel of the Lord. He died, eaten by worms. Above it was mentioned that Saint James is depicted in art with a pilgrims’ staff. He is also depicted with a sword as this was the method of his martyrdom.
SUGGESTED QUESTIONS

1.) Do you have a slight character flaw, such as James’ impetuosity, that God could use for his greater glory?

2.) Do you have companions or friends who share your faith with you or do some of your friends stand in the way of living your faith?

3.) If Jesus gave you a nickname, like he gave James and John, what would be yours? (Be honest now)

4.) Do you ever ask God what He wants of you in terms of your vocation or are you more apt to tell God what your plans are?

SOURCES USED


5.) Voices of the Saints – Ghezzi, Bert (Doubleday, New York - ©2000)

6.) Hoogsteder Paintings – (painting of St. James)

The life of Saint James the Apostle was submitted to The Dead Theologians Society by Gary Gaudreau – Director of Religious Education and Youth Ministry for the Diocese of Baker in Oregon