

Having celebrated Easter just two weeks ago we're in that part of the church's year when we begin to think about the very early days of the Christian church

And in our sermon series on Bible characters we're looking today at the leader of that church in Jerusalem

If I were to ask who that leader was, I guess many might suggest the Apostle Peter

He was often the spokesman for the other disciples

He was the one who first declared that Jesus was the Messiah

And after the resurrection it was Peter who Jesus tasked with feeding his flock

And Peter certainly was **one** of the leaders

But it was James, the brother of Jesus, who became **the** leader – the **Bishop**, of the Jerusalem church.

We caught a glimpse of James, in that role, in the reading from Acts

James seems to have chaired that first Council of the church

And his summing up and authority seems to have been accepted by all.

But I'm surprised by that James became the leader

Surprised that someone who, at first sight, wasn't even one of Jesus' disciples, should suddenly jump, or be thrust, into the leadership position

Surprised too because the few references to James and the brothers of Jesus in the Gospels aren't flattering.

We heard the most well-known one in our Gospel reading just now –

Jesus saying that his **real** brothers and sisters are those who do God's will

And rather implying that his natural brothers and sisters aren't included in that

A bit later in Mark's Gospel (6:3) we read that the people of Jesus' home town couldn't make Jesus out.

They said 'Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?'

Again, rather implying that James and the siblings weren't among Jesus' followers.

In John's Gospel (7:5) we read that "even his own brothers did not believe in him"

So how does someone who seems not to be part of Jesus' group, who doubts Jesus, and doesn't seem to be on his wavelength, suddenly come to be leader of the church in Jerusalem?

Until preparing for this talk my answer would have been that it was all down to the **resurrection** of Jesus.

In fact, I was going to suggest that James, the agnostic or the unbeliever, was converted to faith in Jesus **by the resurrection**

What powerful evidence for the resurrection that would be!

‘Sceptical brother converted by meeting risen Jesus’

I was pleased with that as a sermon theme
It would have neatly linked our series on Bible characters with the Easter story

But I’ve discovered that there’s rather more to James, the brother of Jesus than meets the eye.

To help us with a bit of detective work, we need to understand first what it might mean that James was the **brother** of Jesus.

The simplest explanation, of course, is that after the miraculous birth of Jesus Mary went on to have other children by Joseph in the normal way – one of whom was James.
James would then be a half-brother of Jesus
Same mother, different father.

But that explanation was rejected by the early church Fathers
because they evolved the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary.
The belief that Mary never had normal sexual relations with any man.

We don’t need to go any further into that doctrine except to note that it gave rise to the idea that Joseph, being much older than Mary, already had children from a previous marriage – one of whom was James.

If that is what happened James would have been a step-brother of Jesus

But it’s also been suggested that James may have been the son of **Joseph’s brother**
In which case he would have been Jesus’ cousin
But neither Aramaic nor Hebrew have a word for cousin –
they use the word brother for cousins as well.

Now that’s intriguing,
Because apparently Joseph’s brother was called Alphaeus
And we do know that one of Jesus’ disciples was James, son of Alphaeus.
Interesting!

So James, known as Jesus brother, may actually have been Jesus’ cousin
and, more importantly, one of his disciples **from the beginning**.

A final possibility is that Joseph died while Jesus was young and before Mary had any more children
And that, in accordance with Jewish law, Joseph’s brother married Mary and she had further children by him – including James

James would again have been the son of Alphaeus, and Jesus’ half-brother,
And, again, one of Jesus’ disciples from the beginning

The New Advent Catholic Encyclopaedia sums it all up like this.

“Although there is no full evidence for the identity of James the son of Alphaeus, and James the brother of the Lord, the view that one and the same person is [being]

described is by far the most probable. There is, at any rate, very good ground for believing that the Apostle James, the son of Alphaeus, is the same person as James, the brother of the Lord, the well-known Bishop of Jerusalem.

That would solve another puzzle.

After the resurrection and after the suicide of Judas Iscariot the remaining disciples decided that they should choose a replacement for Judas. They drew up a short-list of two candidates - Joseph and Matthias - and ended up choosing Matthias.

But if, soon after that, James, the brother of Jesus, is leading the Jerusalem church why didn't he even make it onto the short list to replace Judas?

Very probably, he wasn't shortlisted because he was **already** one of the disciples!

So it's more than likely that James, the brother of Jesus, would have been there from the beginning - chosen by Jesus as a disciple. He would have seen all Jesus ministry – heard all his teaching - and been a witness of his passion, his death and his resurrection

That being the case, it's no longer surprising that James became the leader of the Jerusalem church after his brother's death.

And it's not surprising that we have near the end of our Bibles a letter written by James to Jewish Christians throughout the Empire

But in spite of his position as an Apostle and leader in Jerusalem, the church has found it difficult to come to terms with that letter of James.

That's mainly because, James, **alone** among NT letters, makes no reference to the death and resurrection of Jesus. In fact, there are only two references to Jesus in the whole letter and neither of them is actually teaching about Jesus.

On the other hand what James says in his letter clearly reflects the teachings of Jesus

Just one example:

In Matthew Jesus says "Do not swear at all, either by heaven...or by the earth....Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one" (5:34, 37)

James writes "...do not swear either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No' be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation". (5:12)

One scholar says that the letter of James has **thirty** other references to or echoes of the teachings of Jesus.

Most commentators see the letter of James as Wisdom Literature – a sort of New Testament equivalent of the Book of Proverbs -

a collection of wise thoughts, put together with no clear structure –
like pearls strung together in no particular order.

I'm not going to try and list or summarize all these pearls

Instead I'd like to share with you something from my own reading of James earlier this year in my personal Bible reading

The way I do this is to start reading from the beginning and stop each time I come to a verse or phrase that seems to speak to me

At the Readers' Study Evening last Tuesday Bishop Paul described this approach as "looking out for the Holy Spirit's highlighter pen"

That's what I look out for

I then write down the highlighted verse or phrase in my journal and meditate on it –

Writing down the thoughts that come to me

And often turning those thoughts into prayer.

I must confess that I often fall asleep doing this!

And I don't manage to do it every day

So it took me from 13 January to 6 March to get through James' short letter!

What I'd like to do for the final few minutes of this sermon is read you a few of the verses that spoke to me

After each one I'll leave a short silence for your own thoughts

To help you focus I've put them on the sheets you should all have.

Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry (1:19)

Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.(1:26)

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. (1:27)

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. (3:13)

The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere (3:17)

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. (4:10)

Come near to God and he will come near to you (4:8)

Amen

1563 words