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Meditations: July 25, Saint James

Some reflections that can assist our prayer on the feast of Saint James "the Greater," the brother of John.

07/26/2024

- The calling of James and John
- Lightning and thunder
- The greatness of Saint James

WHILE walking alongside the Sea of Galilee, "Jesus saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother

mending their nets, and he called to them.”^[1] Leaving everything behind, they followed Him. Thus began James’s new life with our Lord – an intense adventure that will soon come to an end, since he will become the first of the apostles to give his life for Christ (cf. *Acts* 12:2). But our Lord will ask his brother John to wait until He returns to look for him, after such a long life that the disciples even thought he might never die (cf. *Jn* 21:23).

The Master asked the two brothers for a total self-giving, although in different ways. He offered both of them the possibility to drink from his own chalice, and they accepted the invitation with all the ardor of their passionate nature (cf. *Mt* 20:22).

Jesus called those brothers *Boanerges*, that is, “the sons of thunder” (cf. *Mk* 3:17), and taught them to channel all their energies into a total self-giving in service of

others. When their mother asked that her children be given the first place in his kingdom, Jesus made clear that reigning with Him means to serve; that the first in his kingdom is the one who makes himself the last and the servant of all (cf. *Mt* 20:25-28). This logic often contrasts with our own; it is revolutionary because it is opposed to the domination by some over others. Hence Jesus urges us to be vigilant, to always be attentive so as not to deceive ourselves by “watering down” his teachings in the Gospel.

“Who is freer than the One who is the Almighty? Christ did not, however, live his freedom as an arbitrary power or as domination. He lived it as a service. In this way he ‘filled’ freedom with content, which would otherwise have remained an ‘empty’ possibility of doing or not doing something. Like human life itself, freedom draws its meaning

from love.”^[2] Jesus helped James and John to fill their lives with meaning, with love for God and other people, opening unsuspected horizons for those simple fishermen from Galilee, “the horizons of service,”^[3] much broader than they could ever have imagined . And thus He turned their lives into an exciting adventure.

ENCOURAGED BY JESUS, James and John were “in a hurry to love,”^[4] eager to spend their lives in intense service. The life of James – doing honor to his own name – was like lightning that flashes across the sky in a moment of intense light. He set out right away and took Christ’s message to the ends of the known world, before returning to Jerusalem and pouring out his blood to make fruitful the Church’s first steps in her mission. John’s life, on the other

hand, was like thunder, which comes slowly but forcefully, filling the world with his deep and beautiful words. John was able to meditate at length on Jesus' life and teachings, and left us the treasure of his own writings.

Lightning and thunder are closely linked; they manifest the same force and bring the same message. We cannot separate them, any more than we can separate the two brothers James and John. While Jesus was with them, He wanted them to be especially close to Him. In fact, the two formed together with Peter a small group of disciples with whom the Master was more intimate. When our Lord ascended to heaven, James and John continued to spread the same message, each in his own way.

Saint James continues to do so today, summoning people to his tomb in Compostela. He invites us to set out

boldly, to be willing to reach the ends of the world and overcome our security and comfort. “This is fundamental for Christians. Do we, disciples of Jesus, we, Church, sit around waiting for people to come, or do we know how to get up, to set out with others, to seek others? Saying, ‘But let them come to me, I am here, let them come,’ is not a Christian stance. No, you go to seek them out, you take the first step.”^[5] —

John, in turn, reminds us that if we are not grounded in love for Christ, all that movement and traveling in our life is worth very little. Saint Augustine wrote: “Whoever runs off the path runs in vain; furthermore, he only runs to exhaust himself. Outside the path, the more he runs, the more he gets lost. What is the path we run on? Christ said it: I am the Way. What is the homeland to which we are heading? Christ said: I am the Truth. Guided by Him you

run, towards Him you run, in Him you find rest.”^[6]

THE LIFE OF the Apostle James contains something great that remains hidden from our eyes. We know very little about this apostle who had such a short life, and who didn't leave us any writings. Moreover, the Gospel contains very few of his words. In contrast to the silence of this son of Zebedee, we see the figure of another James, with such important titles as “the Lord's brother” (cf. *Gal* 1:19), one of the first witnesses of his resurrection (cf. *1 Cor* 15:7), bishop of Jerusalem (cf. *Acts* 15:12-21) and pillar of the Church (cf. *Gal* 2:9). This other James enjoyed great authority in the first Christian community, as we see in the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Saint Paul. He also gives his

name to one of the books in the New Testament. So it is surprising that Tradition has given the title of “the Greater” to John’s brother, of whom we know very little.

This son of Zebedee became the Greater by following the path that the Master had shown him: *whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mt 20:26-28).*

That is what James did: making his life one of service, giving his life: *Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit (Jn 12:24),* John will write in his Gospel, shedding light on the mystery of the life and death of his brother James. This mystery includes the strong power to draw so many people that the apostle’s tomb still has today.

Jesus gave the “sons of thunder” another outstanding example of the greatness of service: our Lady, whose company they would have frequently shared. Mary will also help us to embark on the adventure of “finding happiness in friendship with God and leading a life of self-giving and service.”^[7] —

^[1] — General Roman Missal, Entrance Antiphon for today’s feast

^[2] — Benedict XVI, Angelus, 1 July 2007.

^[3] — Francis, Audience, 11 January 2023.

^[4] — Cf. Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 140.

^[5] — Francis, Audience, 11 January 2023.

^[6] — Saint Augustine, *Homily 10 on the First Letter of Saint John*.

^[7] — Saint Josemaría, *Letter 6*, no. 35.

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