

AT THE SIGN OF THE SHELL

St. James, Hampton Hill

Trinity Sunday

Sung Eucharist and Confirmation

Feast of St. James

Sunday, July 12th 2015

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Where, I wonder, is each of you spending your holiday this summer? In about three weeks' time we shall be bound for Germany and Italy. Our furthest destination will be Assisi in Umbria, the tiny home-city of one of the most popular saints of all, St. Francis of Assisi. Holidays, of course, spell out to us time off, perhaps lying on a beach in the sun, perhaps walking the hills in the Lake District. As a child they meant for me making sandcastles and best of all, digging out huge caverns under the deckchairs of my mother and father. Soon enough they'd slide into it and the trouble would start. I'd be firmly told off.

But if you think about it even for a moment, the word holiday had very different roots from sun-bathing and sandcastles. It meant precisely what it spells out – *holy-day*. In earlier centuries people would have neither the money, nor of course, the transport – fast coaches and aeroplanes – to go on holiday. Instead, what they did was to take time away from home and finish their 'break-away' on a holy-day, a *holiday*. Instead of the transport we now know they would have gone on pilgrimage. That meant an interesting journey; it meant company as you went with other people; and it meant a goal because you always head toward a holy place; it meant too that you yourself spent time with God daily in prayers.

Now why have I begun here? Well, first of all because today we're keeping the feast of St. James, your holy-day or *holiday*. We'll come back to that in a moment or two. But second, we are today going to be confirming Emma, Lucie, Mark, Susan, Flora and Julian. In a way, all of them are on a pilgrimage. But this is the pilgrimage of our Christian lives. Just as on any journey or pilgrimage there are milestones - telling us how much further we have to go, so too in our Christian lives. Baptism, confirmation, first communion – for some us *ordination* are milestones.

One of the prayers we shall all say together today makes this pilgrimage very clear. It's the words that we used to say over every person being confirmed as the bishop laid his hands on their head. It says simply:

'Defend, O Lord, these your servants with your heavenly grace, that they may continue yours for ever, and daily increase in your Holy Spirit more and more until they come to your everlasting Kingdom.'

It's a great prayer since it reminds us of journey, our pilgrimage.

So, first of all, today we give thanks for this journey and for this most holy step along the way. But, as we take this step, so too we face challenges. For only a moment's glance at Jesus' life reminds us that the pilgrimage he took was one of terrifying challenge, ending on the cross and crowned by the resurrection. There is a commission that sometimes appears in the confirmation service which is pretty fierce. In it, we are reminded to pray daily, to come to the eucharist, to defend the *weak*, to seek out the *poor* and to pray for the *world and its leaders*.

Both our readings were challenging in that way – the first showed how the early Christian church collected money and food to give relief to their brethren in distress in Judea. The gospel passage about James and John and their mother reminds us that we’re called to *serve*. What might those of you being confirmed be being challenged to do or to be? Might you be challenged to be ordained like me or Father Peter? Might you even be called to the religious life, to be a sister, a monk or a friar? Might your vocation be in your own profession or area of study?

Whatever it might be, you’re being challenged today and that challenge also goes to all the rest of us here! But, as I said earlier, none of this would happen without journey and pilgrimage. This month, in Santiago da Compostela in north west Spain, your feast, the feast of St. James will be celebrated like nowhere else. They have an incense thurible like a bomb! If it came off its pulleys it would wipe out the entire Spanish Royal Family in one go!

Why do they celebrate so much there? Well, legend has it that St. James the Great, one of the sons of Zebedee, after he was martyred was brought to Spain, to Santiago – that simply means St. James. Thousands of people walk on a number of different paths – sometimes hundreds of miles across Europe – to that holy place. They often carry a big scallop shell. Why was that? Well, because once they got to Santiago they’d journey another fifteen miles or so to the little bay where legend said St. James’ body was landed. They picked a shell from the beach to show they’d got there.

So now, every time you go to fill up with petrol and see the big yellow scallop shell, the Shell Petrol emblem, remember this day. Remember your baptism and confirmation, remember all the saints and remember Jesus, whose body we shall soon receive in the Holy Eucharist.

Amen.

Readings

Acts. II. 27 – 12.2

Matthew. 20. 20-28.