



## The stories and meals that refresh us

Regulars here will know that for our Patronal Festival, we usually hold our services outside in our courtyard and make use of one of the most distinctive features of this magnificent Wren church – the outdoor pulpit. You may well have been rather surprised today, having circumnavigated the various road closures that are becoming a regular feature of Sundays here in the West End, to find our courtyard has instead become a pop-up refreshment station for Cancer Research supporters taking part in today's bike race. The charity are using both the courtyard and our basement and so all our Patronal celebrations – this service, Evensong this afternoon and lunch in between (to which everyone is welcome), are all happening here in the church, and for the second time this year, which is for us an unusually high average, we're using this pulpit for the sermon.

For those of you unfamiliar with the idea of a patronal festival, I should explain that today we celebrate our patron saint, St James the apostle, whose Feast Day was on Tuesday. So who exactly was St. James? He was the son of Zebedee and it's thought that he and his brother John were first cousins of Jesus. They were fishermen, raised in the family trade, and James and John were mending nets in their father's boat when the two of them were called by Jesus to be disciples. They followed him immediately. It seems that James was one of the inner circle of disciples – along with John and Peter he was present at the raising of Jairus's daughter, the Transfiguration and in the garden in Gethsemane. The term Jesus used to refer to the two brothers – *Boanerges* or the "Sons of Thunder", suggests that they had pretty fiery temperaments. In our Gospel passage we

hear the mother of James and John asking Jesus if her two sons may sit on either side of him in God's kingdom. Although at the time they don't understand the full implications of Jesus' question, James and John both claim that they are able to drink the cup that Jesus must drink, and indeed, this affirmation was fulfilled when James was martyred by Herod Agrippa in AD44.

For the benefit of any visitors and guests who might be wondering about the profusion of fishing nets and scallop shells, I should explain that the scallop shell is the symbol of St. James. It's a symbol of Christian pilgrimage, fittingly taking that association from the famous Camino to Santiago de Compostela (*Sant Iago* being Spanish for *Saint James*) – a medieval pilgrim route that starts in France and leads through Spain to the famous cathedral in Santiago de Compostela, believed to be the resting place of St. James's remains.

A patronal festival provides an opportunity to pause, to reflect and take stock. So today we celebrate not just St James, but also this church and site and all that happens here. Today we give thanks for our common life and in doing so, I'm inspired by the late Jim Cotter's version of Psalm 133 which begins: *"At oases on the pilgrim way we rest together, sharing the stories and meals that refresh us."*

As outside in our courtyard and downstairs, cyclists pause for refreshment, for time out from the demands of the race, and swap stories and experiences, so here, each week, we gather around our altar to do the same. We come to take time out from our everyday lives, to be fed together in this sacrament,

this holy meal, to seek refreshment and to reinvigorate ourselves and our faith as we explore the stories of Christ and his followers, extraordinary ordinary people like Saint James. But what we do and share here together on a Sunday is so much more than a spiritual pitstop. Rather it is the focal point, if you like, the launch pad.

The nets from which all these scallops shells hang today remind us of the interconnectedness we find in this place, where generations have come to pray and share the bread and wine. These connections span both time and space. And using that theme as a launch pad, today I offer a reflection on those connections, and the act of re-membering:

On this 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of Passchendaele, we remember the 31 men of this parish who were killed in the First World War.

In this 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the passing of the law partially decriminalising homosexuality, we remember Robin Miller, a much loved elder of our LGBT group, who worshipped here for many years and who knew and remembered all too well, first hand, what it was like to live as a gay man before that landmark legal change.

As we remember Robin, so we are grateful for the beautiful stone angel head he bequeathed to us, the work of stone carver Emily Young, and continuing that sense of connection, we are delighted to be hosting a number of Emily's larger angel heads in our garden and courtyard over the coming months. These extraordinary works are made from a variety of stones, some of which are millions of years old, reminding us of our connectedness with the earth.

As we reflect upon some of the many powerful art installations we have hosted here, so we are reminded of our connectedness with the refugees whose lifejackets formed part of the *Flight* installation here the Christmas before last; people we may never meet but with whom we are forever connected.

And we are reminded of those people we have got to know - of the homeless guests from our Winter Shelter who made the beautiful Lent altar frontal the Easter before last and this year's *Tools of Compassion* tea towel.

As we give thanks today for the clergy who have served St James's through the ages, so too we give thanks for John Russell, formerly of this parish who was ordained on the 1<sup>st</sup> of this month and is now settling into his curacy in Chelsea, and we give thanks for Georgina who will begin her ordination training in Durham in the autumn.

Today is very much a day for the sharing of the stories and meals that refresh us, but we remember too, all the stories which have been told and in this building which illustrate the realities of our common life.

Today we honour the stories of those in our community recently granted leave to remain here in the UK, and of those still going through the gruelling asylum application process.

We value the stories of those who have been coming to this church for many years, who live and work all over London and beyond.

We celebrate the stories of those who have pledged and affirmed their marriage vows here.

We respect the stories of those who share conversations, reflections and experiences together over lunch at our monthly LGBT group or our pub discussion group, Vagabonds.

We continue to tell the stories of those who were the guides and hosts for those of us who visited the Holy Land nearly 3 years ago.

We welcome the stories of those in their 20's and 30's who enjoy the friendships in our fast-growing Circus Spirit gatherings – both in church and in the pub.

We rejoice at the stories of those whose hard work has been rewarded in the passing of exams.

We attend to the stories of those who come to enjoy the camaraderie of our International Breakfast Group, who are grateful for a welcoming space free of officialdom.

We share in the stories of first days at school and last days at work; we empathise with the stories of those facing the challenges of ageing parents, of employment and relationship worries; of concerns about health or bank balances; of disappointment, loss and bereavement; of taking risks and rising to new challenges.

As St Paul makes clear in our New Testament reading this morning, we come each week or as often as we are able, with all our frailties, as treasure in clay jars, affirming all of these stories – of hope and heartbreak, of triumph and adversity, of birth and death, love and loss, loyalty and betrayal, deception and delight, shame, guilt, pride, lament,

achievement, awe and wonder: all of these stories can be heard and held and honoured here in this church, in this place of reflection, refreshment sustenance and prayer; this place where tears of joy and sadness can and do freely flow. All of these stories can be heard, held and honoured.

Here around this holy table, the stories of our lives connect through the ages and in the present moment with the story of the one who gave his life for us, and on any given Sunday, we can find beauty, solace, justice, solidarity, understanding, challenge, hope, reality, vision, struggle, faith, courage and strength in and with each other. For all this, for this place, for St James, for this church and for one another, thanks be to God. Amen.

Lindsay Meader