



the first time

A young man interrupts a service in the temple courtyard and shouts at the congregation. He denounces the corruption of his own religious establishment, although the details of what he says are not recorded. The crowd is furious – wouldn't you be – in fact they say they want to kill him for what he is saying.

We often think of Jeremiah as an old man with a beard – but here he is a young man with, as he describes “fire shut up in his bones”. Immensely brave, he stands his ground – go ahead he says. Do what you want. I can't say anything else.

Our second reading involves an equally charismatic individual – this time it's Jesus – who's grown up working as a carpenter – but at the age of 30 starts to gather a group together to teach something new. Another young man with energy enough for ten. It's an extraordinary event, as far as Mark's gospel tells it; Jesus walks up to a bunch of men at work – note they're not in church – or doing anything religious – they're at work – just a normal day. He says, in effect, “stop what you're doing. Come with me”. And they do.

One in the temple, one at work. One denouncing corruption of his own society, one offering a new way of living to a bunch of ordinary people in their workplace. Prophetic young men living respectively about 3,000 and 2,000 years ago. What relevance can they possibly have – look around you at central London – with its buzz and noise and commerce and over 300 languages spoken just in this city alone?

But contained in these two stories is ancient wisdom. Ancient wisdom about what it's like to be a human being that is just as relevant today as it was then.

What is this wisdom? Well it's what you already know: that however fixed it all looks, life can turn on a sixpence. A stomach churning moment of tragedy or love; a decision taken in good faith at the time that when you look back you can see has

set you off on a path you would never have imagined.

It's easy to imagine that life is pretty set. We have our routines; we make the same journeys, we talk to the same people often, we have our own places and favourite haunts and sometimes because of money worries or relationship stress, we might feel stuck and just unable to get unstuck.

If that is you, then our patron St James is such a hopeful figure – because even at an ordinary day at work, he is creative, open hearted enough to follow his instinct, change his life and find a new way.

I was reminded recently of a beautiful quotation from the African American novelist and poet Maya Angelou. She wrote this. *When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time.*

Believe them the first time. There is something about the speed and simplicity of this that means that to my ears anyway, she is saying something akin to our readings this afternoon.

There is something incredibly tender about this. We hear it – maybe you hear it – as an encouragement to be a better person – when someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time. Be open to them. Don't second guess them, or challenge them. Just try believing them – the first time.

But I'd like to suggest that perhaps it's even more powerful when you take it not as an instruction for self-improvement but imagining you are the person being believed. The first time.

We talk a lot in church about believing things. Believing in things. Mostly God, and Jesus and truth and love. Believing is one of the key things the church is interested in – isn't it?

What if I said no. What if I said that assenting to a list of stuff is not all the church is interested in.

Maybe you'd be surprised – maybe you think I'd be watering down faith.

But actually what I take from this gospel where Jesus just walks up to a bunch of ordinary people on their ordinary day – is that he knows them first and believes them the first time. And they are invited – as everyone is invited – to believe back.

Faith then becomes a freely offered response to God's first believing you. Faith isn't then a job or a task or an effort on our part. It's a simple response when we can accept – deeply and fundamentally that we ourselves have been believed.

We spend much of our time, even if we don't realise we do, justifying ourselves, making sure our fragile egos are protected by the trenches we dig every day, making sure other people know how busy we are, or how productive, or how engaged we are. One of the hardest things in our spiritual life is to accept that God believes in us, loves us, contemplates us with love that is utterly independent of how much we try to earn it. God believes us. Every day. For the first time.

Imagine what that's like; you are believed when you show God who you are – the first time. You don't have to qualify things or get into why or how you got there or what's lacking. You're just believed. It's such a choking relief that you don't have to justify or apologise or explain or defend yourself – it's such a choking relief that you don't have to do all that stuff – that your own ability to believe and trust belief, and say like James did – OK I'll come – all that seems more obvious than it did.

This gospel story is an incredibly creative story because James, our patron we celebrate today, was at his day job, but still somehow was open hearted enough to notice a change of life when it was presented to him.

We celebrate our patronal festival today, celebrating the story of James and the story of our church over the past 300 more years. And our history is important to us – we are called after James which gives us not just a set of ideas or a philosophy or a plan or a book – but a story about a person. A person who walked with – who drew alongside Jesus and travelled with him. We know elsewhere from other stories that he

was by no means perfect either. James was sometimes arrogant, competitive, argumentative. What a relief. Our saint is a human being – or as the comedian Frank Muir commented, saints are people who have been dug up and edited.

And today is a day to celebrate the truth that our church is built on historic land, yes but more importantly on the stories of the people who have lived here. Who have prayed here, who have been born and died here. Church is an assembly where before God, there is no story that cannot be told here; however shameful, or frightening, however ordinary or uneventful, however sickening or disturbing or delightful.

In 1688, the year of the last Catholic king in England and 4 years after this church was opened, this parish decided to establish a workhouse for what were known in the jargon of the time as the able-bodied poor. St James's Westminster – which is the proper name for this parish - was active in providing accommodation for destitute Londoners – and in 1776, the workhouse in Poland Street a stone's throw from this building, had grown into one of the largest in the country, run by a Board of Guardians, known as the Westminster Union – which interestingly still meets today 242 years later as a dining club usually at the Grosvenor Hotel. In the 1881 census – 137 years ago that workhouse had over 600 inmates. Ann Standeren, who aged 81 was listed as a failed greengrocer, Rose Stone, 19 years old, a general domestic servant, and the Sullivan family: Daniel, 35, a house painter, his son Daniel, aged 9 and his grandmother Mary 85 listed as a comb finisher.

Today's stories are told every day - and I pray that this is a place where people are believed. Here in this courtyard where people meet up before going out - where our traders trade, where a fox often runs across the courtyard at dusk, where ducks lay eggs, where bats communicate their night-time conversation. Where only in the last month we have walked a precious coffin down Jermyn street and stopped the traffic, where we witnessed thousands of people right here protesting against the US President's visit to the UK, where we proudly took part as a church in the London Pride March, where we listen carefully and tenderly to individual people every day in our counselling caravan, where we welcome whoever comes into our garden and our beautiful spacious courtyard.

We hope that this is a place where people are believed; where people are believed in.

Our history is important: the layers of life that since the leper hospital was here have been built – story upon story - a world that still is full of men like Thomas Billington, in 1881 listed as a waiter, or Hannah Barratt a charwoman. Working and too poor to survive. Remembering the character of church as an assembly of people in a building where prayer is indispensable, where just action is expected, where God is addressed, where we are ourselves contemplated by love.

But , knowing that life can turn on a sixpence, we also affirm today the essential character of our communion as Christians. We will be known as Christians, as followers of Christ not by the recitation of the creeds, not by our right on-ness, by the newspapers we read or the amount we give to charity. Not by the art we create or the marches we go on or the groups we set up or the books we read. It doesn't mean we stop using

our brains or suspend our faculties of discernment or criticism – of course not – but we lose our way as a church if we think that there is any other way but a life, lived together, held by God's faith in us and our faith in God and each other. A life of love.

And so in the spirit of Jeremiah who courageously took a step out to speak truth to power, in the spirit of James who saw Jesus during an ordinary day at work and, because Jesus somehow believed in him, just took the risk and believed him back, I hope that we might be able to live in the open hearted spirit of love that is contained in those beautiful words from Maya Angelou. This is what Jesus did. This is what James did. And together they set out to change the world.

When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time.

Amen.