

How Warm Are Your Cockles?

Do you know what cockles are? I knew the expression but I had to look up what they were. The symbol of St. James is the scallop or cockle. James is said to have travelled far to preach the Gospel. Sea shells, scallops, or cockle halves were used by travelers to scoop water to drink. What does that have to do the heart? Cockles are marine bivalves, think clams. "The cockles of the heart are its ventricles, named by some in Latin as "*cochleae cordis*", from "cochlea" (snail), alluding to their shape. The saying means to warm and gratify one's deepest feelings" (*Sidney Morning Herald*, 2-12-05) . So does St. James today warm your cockles?

As you know, the date the church celebrates for a saint, is his or her death day, not their birthday. Everyone's birthday is a birth into dying and eternal death, hence the pain that accompanies it. But a saint's death day is their putting off once and for all dying and death. A saint, is a forgiven sinner, that is anyone in heaven or on earth who trusts that Jesus' blood and righteousness covers their sins. So again I ask: does this Festival of St. James' dying warm your cockles?

I'll bet you don't even know which James we're celebrating. I can say that because I myself had to look this up. There are 3 James named in the Bible. There's James the brother of the Lord, leader of the Jerusalem church in Acts, writer of the Epistle of James. There's James the Son of Alphaeus, one of the 12 apostles. He's associated sometimes with Thaddaeus, sometimes with Simon the Zealot, and might be the brother of Matthew. He's sometimes referred to as James the Little, or Less compared to the this last James, the Son of Zebedee, the brother of John, and cousin of Jesus (www.internationalstandardbible.com/J/james.html). So which of the 3 is this Feast celebrating? This last one.

July 25 has been the Feast of St. James for 14 or 15 centuries. It commemorates his dying 42 A.D. in Jerusalem. But this only leaves my cockles lukewarm. Although I could've celebrated it 5 times since 1982, this is only my second time doing so. But then Scripture itself seems to give it little recognition. If you zoned out during the Epistle reading you could miss the scant 7 Greek words the Holy Spirit says about the first apostle to give his life for the faith. "And killed James John's brother with sword." That's it. One of Jesus' inner circle during the apostles 3 years of seminary training. One of only 3 eyewitnesses to the Transfiguration, the raising of Jairus' daughter, and Jesus' agony in Gethsemane, murdered, killed, possibly beheaded, and the Spirit only has 7 words? I'd hope if the authorities arrested and killed me for the faith you'd manage a longer text message.

Well, if his death is lukewarm, I got to tell you his life was hardly heartwarming. He was a commercial fisherman with his father and younger brother John. They were partners with Peter and Andrew and they owned several boats and employed hired servants: "the establishment they possessed must have been considerable" (Ibid.). Now you know the NT hardly has a favorable opinion of the rich, right? "Easier for camel to go through the eye of a needle than for rich man to enter heaven" said Jesus after he made the rich young man choke on his riches (Mt. 19:24). How about the parable which Jesus calls the rich man a fool for not being ready to die suddenly? Or how about these startling words from James, the Lord's brother, about the rich: "Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten. Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire" (Ja. 5:1-3). If this is how it is with the rich, then in the words of Three Dog Night, "I don't wanna see no more."

Not much cockle warming connected to his business, but what about the rest of his life? He's the brother of John and is always named first, so he's the oldest. His younger brother is 6 times called by the Holy Spirit "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (Jn. 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 20:8 21:7; 21:20). How would you like to be an older brother to the one who was "the disciple whom Jesus loved"? And we think our parents having favorites is hard to ignore! The 2 events we know about these two, make James even less heartwarming. I say James more than John because James is the older and being a younger brother myself I know that I followed my older brother in all things.

So when Jesus called James and John Sons of Thunder (Mk. 3:17), I'm thinking James was more fiery compared to the younger, beloved John. This nickname by Jesus probably came from the incident recorded in Lk. 9 (:54). After the Samaritans refused to welcome the travelling Jesus, they asked Him, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" And then Jesus rebuked them saying that their spirit wasn't His Spirit. Ouch! But they weren't just Sons of Thunder; they were Sons of Pride too as the Gospel reading showed. "Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Him. "Teacher," they said, "we want You to do for us whatever we ask." "What do you want me to do for you?" He asked. They replied, "Let one of us sit at Your right and the other at Your left in your glory." Jesus said they didn't know what they were asking. We do. We know Jesus' glory is His innocent, brutal, damnable death on the cross in our place for our sins. The ultimate glory for Jesus who kept the law of God perfectly was to die in place of all lawbreakers. And who is on His right and left then? Two crucified thieves.

Okay James doesn't warm any cockles with his pridefulness, but it gets worse. Read Matthew 20:20f. "Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of Him. "What is it you want?" He asked. She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at Your right and the other at Your left in Your kingdom." You know the only thing less heartwarming than a blowhard, hardcore, proudful

man? A momma's boy whose like that. Matthew shows you Mamma Zebedee kneeling before Jesus on behalf of her two grown sons standing there! That does it. Either were removing this Feast from the Church Year or we're renaming it: The Festival of Momma Boys.

But Lutherans don't celebrate saints' day to have their cockle's warmed but to have faith in Jesus stirred. We said in 1530 over against the Roman Catholic church's use of saints: "It is also taught among us that the saints should be kept in remembrance so that our faith may be strengthened when we see what grace they received and how they were sustained by faith" (AC, XXI, 1, Tappert, 46). There's an early, extrabiblical story, that says James' accuser seeing James's steadfastness, repented, declared himself a Christian and was beheaded with James (*Penguin Dictionary of Saints*, 182). Whether that really happened or not it illustrates what we are to take away from the life and death of James, cockles warmed or not: faith.

If Jesus can cause James to leave wealth, status, and family all behind to follow Him with nothing more than words, promises, forgiveness, and grace, He can cause us to put anything that ranks above Jesus, our forgiveness, our following Him in second place. But do note: we don't take this to mean you should all give up your jobs, sell your homes, and become pastors, missionaries, or Bible translators. We say in our 1530 statement of what we believe: "each of us in his own calling" are to follow James' example (AC, XXI, 1). I don't know how the faith, life, and death of St. James applies to your calling. I can't know what in your heart floats above, gets between you and Jesus. I only know that if Jesus can rescue James from being entangled in riches, wishing to be judge and jury, and pride, He can do as much and more for me and you.

The thing to do is not to start where it's natural to. Don't start at the beginning of James' life. Start with Jesus. Jesus knew all that James was and was not, even as He does you and me. Jesus knew about his proneness to thunderous judgement, his pride, and even his willingness to hide behind his momma's skirt. Yet still He called him to the faith that for the sake of Jesus' innocent life and guilty death on his behalf, God had put away his sins. And so now in the words of a contemporary worship song from the 70s: "When He looks at me He sees not what I used to be but he sees Jesus." God forgot – the New Testament is that for Jesus' sake God remembers are sins no more – that James wasn't of the same Spirit as He. God forgot that James thought he deserved the number two or three spot in the Lord's kingdom.

The Devil, the World around you, and your own Flesh will never forget on this side of heaven what you used to be. But your memories, opinions, or fears don't have standing in the courtroom of God on the Last Day. He's not going to ask what the Devil thinks, the World around you thinks, or even you think. He's going to ask Jesus. And Jesus is going to say: what sin of anger, what of pride, what of lust, greed, unbelief, bigotry, and hatred? I carried them all away from this person and had them nailed to the cross on My own body, took them into the grave, and rose without them.

Any time you talk about a saint who has died for the faith, the same unholy 3 that haunt you about your sins, will haunt you about your faith. They say things like: You who can't even live for Jesus how on earth do you think you'll be able to die for Him? You who go out of your way sometimes not to mention His name in life think you'll confess Him in death! Well, it's all the same miracle. It's a miracle when anyone believes be they a newborn babe or a grizzled old man. It's a miracle that I confess my sins and profess to believe in the forgiveness of them for Jesus' sake. Faith is a miracle too wonderful for me that God does in me through His Word and Sacraments. I know not how He will keep me in this faith today or tomorrow let alone at the hour of my death. I only know that in matters of salvation it can't depend on the strength of the one needing saving but on the strength of the Savior. Now that's heartwarming. Amen

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St. James, Apostle (20210725); Acts 12:1-2