

Philip, James, and the Apostolic Reality

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor, ACT, 6 May 2018

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Isaiah 30: 18-21; Psalm 19: 1-6; 1 Corinthians 15: 1-8, John 14: 6-14

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Well, this is the first time in 30 years that I've preached on St Philip and St James, and in fact I don't think I've ever even *heard* a sermon marking this occasion—though I'm very aware that you all have! So, what to say about these two members of the 12 apostles?

There's James the less, *not* the brother of Jesus, *nor* the son of Zebedee *nor* the author of the James epistle, but just one in a list of 12 names. And there's Philip: *not* Philip the Evangelist, one of seven deacons set apart in Acts chapter 6, who later evangelised and baptised the Ethiopian Eunuch but, instead, Philip the Apostle who we meet a few times in the gospels, chiefly in John—the one who

famously said to Nathaniel ‘Come and See’ when he brought him to meet Jesus; the one who helped the Greeks find their way to Jesus at that festival; the one who couldn’t think where to find enough to feed the multitude in his familiar Bethsaida locality when Jesus set him this task; and, finally, the one who had that defining exchange with Jesus in today’s Gospel. What to say about these two, who are chiefly remembered for being close to Jesus—for being caught up in the apostolic reality as witnesses to Jesus?

It seems to me that the apostolic reality itself is the most appropriate subject of a sermon marking the feast day of these two apostles who are chiefly known for their part in it. We don’t know them as heroes of faith, or even as clearly-drawn individuals. In our age of individualism, careerism, experientialism and me-firstism, of celebrity social media profiles and the lifelong drama of having to make or at least to find ourselves, these two are nobodies, they’re ancient oddities—there’s nothing to see here! But from God’s perspective the most important thing about Philip and James is what

they've had the privilege of being caught up in, of what they've seen, and in Philip's case of his evolving understanding of Jesus Christ. This, rather than something individual and dramatic, is the truest, most real thing about them.

Dare I suggest to you that this is going to be the truest thing about us, too, about you and me, when all's said and done? Dare I suggest to you that the sign of the cross over our coffins and the water of baptism sprinkled on them will ultimately be the most important and long-lasting pointers to what our lives have truly meant? As for me, when my books have been forgotten, and all that's left of my legacy are a few traces in unvisited corners of the internet, someone may find a faded grave marker in Woden cemetery that says

<p>Scott Cowdell, priest 1960-20??</p>
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and if they're one of the few remaining Christians, they might notice and say, 'look at this one, he was one of us'. Yet, though they know nothing else about me, or who I was, they'll have put their finger on

the most important thing about me. And so it is with Philip and James, though they have the added memorial of Churches named after them.

Now, this apostolic reality to which they belonged, which constitutes the truest and most significant marker of their identity and their eternal remembrance: what is it?

The first thing I want to say about the apostolic reality is that it's what God consistently brings about in the world. We see early hints of it from the Old Testament today. In our wonderful Psalm portion, we hear of God calling the whole cosmos to witness God's love and grace, with all the reliability of day following day. The heavens are telling the glory of God, and before human witnesses were on the scene to see and understand proclaim God's glory, the whole creation was declaring it—the very stones were crying out. The heavenly bodies that once served as harsh overseers in a pagan cosmology were grabbed by the scruff of the neck and co-opted as

witnesses to Israel's God—a God of gracious mercy and faithfulness.

Here is the apostolic reality announcing itself. We hear it in our Isaiah reading, too, as a traumatised people receives the gentle reassurance of new hope from God, with a new sense of God's guiding presence—a presence that's near to hand, genuine, personal and reliable.

For Paul in our Epistle reading this morning, the apostolic reality reveals its final Christian shape. Paul testifies to a body of faith that he's inherited and is now passing on. This apostolic reality is the good news of Jesus Christ, in which sin and death are overcome and, as a crucial part of that victory, apostolic witnesses are summoned, the last and unlikeliest of all being Paul himself.

What I notice here is that the apostolic reality is both a body of authoritative tradition *and* a body of people called to embody it and pass it on: it's both informational and personal, both revelational and ecclesiological.

I remember studying a wonderful ecumenical report from the early 1980s, when I was a theological student in Brisbane, called ‘Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry’, or the BEM document for short. It encouraged Episcopal Churches like ours, who regard the bishops as successors to the apostles through the laying of hands, not to forget that the apostolic reality is also the good news itself—the living tradition and not just the traditional custodians who are charged to pass it on. But BEM also encouraged the Protestant churches, which had dispensed with the ministry of bishops, to recognize the value of a dedicated order of ministry to whom the apostolic reality is personally committed. I think we see both perspectives at work in today’s epistle, as Paul testifies to the apostolic reality while also exercising his personal calling to pass it on. And so too with the apostles Philip and James: they were witnesses, and personally significant for that, and yet the most significant thing about them was the wonderful reality to which they witnessed, and for which one ancient tradition tells us that Philip gave his life.

Finally, in today's Gospel, we focus entirely on our man Philip, and we see what the apostolic reality most deeply means. It's good to know that apostles too are on a journey of faith and understanding, and that Philip apparently still had a way to go. His exchange with Jesus takes us to the heart of the Christian mystery. Philip asks to see God, and John's Jesus gently chides him for failing to make an obvious connection. Here, long before the creeds, the mystery of Christ and the Spirit and the Church is laid out by John's Jesus for Philip, who is invited to confidently take up his new identity in the apostolic reality. Although the Holy Spirit isn't named at this point in John's Gospel, the life of the Spirit is what Philip is invited to embrace, trusting in Jesus, recognising that Jesus' works are God's works, and coming to share those works himself as his desires become shaped by Jesus' desires.

Friends, this is the ordinary mysticism of coming to abide in Christ, of being aligned to Christ in our desires like iron filings are aligned by a

magnet. Hence Jesus' remarkable assurance in today's Gospel: that all our prayers made in his name will be answered. This is because the closer we draw to Jesus, the less likely we are to pray for anything out of character. This is because what Jesus grants to us in prayer, as he tells Philip, is what will glorify the Father, as a sign of the good news. And that certainly won't be compatible with a lot of unworthy things I might be inclined to ask God for if it was just left up to me. Rather, as we learn to pray in line with Jesus' desires, and with God's honour and glory in mind, our prayers and hopes and actions begin to line up, and we become more mature Christians, more consistent, and more life-giving to others.

So, friends, we may not have Churches named after us, like Philip and James, but we are participants with them in the Apostolic reality, especially here in the Eucharist, and as we're sent out from here to pass on this life-giving reality to others.

The Lord be with you ...