FEAST OF THE APOSTLE JAMES St Matt 13: 54-58

Today is the Feast of the Apostle James, the Brother of the Lord or Adelphotheos in Greek, as he is known in the Orthodox Church, but with a significant difference from the view of the western or Protestant Churches who hold him to be a full blood brother born of the Virgin Mary and fathered by Joseph. In contrast the Eastern Churches and Catholics too see him as a half-brother who was born of a previous wife of the elderly Joseph, like his four named brothers, James, Joseph, Simon and Judas and unnamed sisters in the Gospels, and not from Mary. They are mentioned in Mark’s Gospel as well as in Matthew’s account. As Orthodox we believe that she was ‘ever virgin’ as she is celebrated in the Divine Liturgy and other services of the Church. James’ other title in the Church is the ‘First Archbishop of Jerusalem’ and we know that he was head of the church in Jerusalem with Peter until the latter had to depart for his own safety to the region around Joppa. He is mentioned by the Jewish historian Josephus in this capacity and also by St Paul in his letter to the Galatians, where he says that he met only the two leaders of the Church in Jerusalem to verify that he had turned from his persecution of the Church to accept Christ after his revelation to him on the road to Damascus. He is often called the ‘Just’ and in the Acts of the Apostles he was the last to speak at the Council of Jerusalem on the divisive subject of compulsory circumcision for those among the Gentiles who had embraced the faith. His balanced and very sensible judgement at the end of the discussion was “We should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God but they should abstain from the pollutions of idols and from unchastity and from blood”. We know from a number of historical sources that he was martyred in Jerusalem by stoning at the instigation of the High Priest Hanan on the charge of ‘breaking the law’.

The account of the Lord’s visit to his home town Nazareth appears in all three synoptic gospels with Luke giving the fuller version of the incident with a slightly different twist. The details agree that he entered the synagogue on the Sabbath and began teaching there. The authority and wisdom with which he speaks overwhelms those present not to mention his ‘mighty works’ of which presumably they have heard from Capernaum or witnessed for themselves. They begin to ask how this is possible since they have known his family for a number of years as ordinary people and they cannot understand where this man acquired all these gifts. Unbelief prevails in their hearts and minds and we are told that “they took offense at him”. St Mark uses almost exactly the same phrase in his gospel account while St Luke says that Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah the verses in chapter 61 beginning “The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor…”. And then he adds, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”. The audience react with wonder at his words but the Lord says that although they would like him to perform the mighty works he did at Capernaum he cannot repeat them here since “a prophet is not without honour except in his own country’. This statement kindles an outburst of anger against him according to St Luke’s account and he barely escapes with his life. The gospel stresses that “he did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief”.

The account in St Matthew’s gospel gives rise to a number of questions. His fellow countrymen for the most part did not accept him though they had shown their amazement at what he did and said. What would it take to convince them? His own brother, James, became one of his greatest followers in that he led the church at Jerusalem and even

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submitted to death by stoning in the cause of spreading the good news of the kingdom of

heaven announced by his younger brother. Why do some people not believe when they see the truth in front of them? The answer of course must be ‘they don’t want to’.

One of the most testing verses is that at the Mount of Olives when the Lord returns to the Father. We read that “when the eleven gathered they worshipped him, though some doubted”. How is this possible when they had seen him crucified? Perhaps in order to shed some light on these questions we should look at contemporary society where we witness unparalleled acts of incredulity and denial like those who write books saying that the Holocaust never happened despite the overwhelming concrete evidence to the contrary. And I hope I’m not offending anyone by pointing to the antics of the last US president and the numerous cases of so-called conspiracy theory which have arisen in the world in recent decades. As a world we certainly seem to be dividing into those countries where you can speak the truth openly and those where you most definitely cannot.

This idea of acceptance and rejection in the saying that a prophet is not accepted in his own country is mirrored in another famous statement of the Lord’s in which he says, “The stone which the builders rejected, the same has become the head of the corner. This is the Lord’s doing and it is marvellous in our eyes”. This verse, which is a quote from the Psalms and which appears in the Matins service along with other verses from the same psalm immediately after the opening Great Litany is used to sum up the teaching of the parable of the wicked tenants who seize the owner’s vineyard after beating up or killing those who come to collect a portion of the vintage on his behalf and ultimately, they kill the owner’s son. The Lord asks the scribes and Pharisees what the owner will do and they say that he will send people to take the vineyard back, kill the wicked tenants and let it out to those who will provide the fruit in due season. Then after quoting the above psalm, Christ sums up the parable with the words, “Therefore I tell you the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it”. Like the people in Nazareth the chief priests and Pharisees are furious at what he says and try unsuccessfully to arrest him. From then on they begin planning his downfall and death.

These incidents which we have looked at are a stark reminder to us that we as Christians are not to take for granted what has been given to us as followers of the Lord and indeed the blessings in many shapes and forms that we have been given to enjoy in this world. There are many waiting to hear the news of the kingdom of heaven as some of us may have seen from time to time with those who come into this church for the first time, hear or experience something which speaks to them and decide to stay. Or those like the Apostle James, whose feast we celebrate today. He knew Christ personally and physically over many years and was so deeply affected by him that he was prepared to follow him for the rest of his life unto an undeserved death.

May God grant us that same steadfast devotion and faithfulness to His Son, who though rejected by many was raised by the Father to become the cornerstone and head of the Church which he purchased in obedience and humiliation with his own life-blood.

 *23/10/2022, Oxford*