

May 1, 2011      St. Philip and St. James the Lesser      John 14:8-14

St. Philip and St. James are two of the lesser known of Jesus' 12 disciples, and in the case of St. James, there isn't even much ancient church tradition about him either. I want to look at each for a couple minutes and then see how who they were can give us insight into our own faith. We'll start with Philip.

Philip shows up a few times in the Bible. He was born in Bethsaida, the same fishing village on the shores of Galilee that Peter and Andrew came from. He was one of the first of the 12 disciples and he is responsible for bringing the apostle Nathanael to Jesus. At the feeding of the 5000 Philip is the one Jesus turns to and says, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" And Philip, thinking that Jesus was being serious, replies, "Six months wages would not buy enough for each of them to get a little." (John 6:5-7)

In John 12 we see Philip is helps some Greeks who wanted to see Jesus. And in John 14, our gospel reading, we hear Philip's only other act recorded in scripture. He says to Jesus, "Lord,

show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." We'll come back to that in a few minutes.

Church tradition tells us that after Pentecost Philip went first to the city of Scythia to evangelize and he was very successful. Later he went to the region of Phrygia where he stayed until his death. According to some accounts he was martyred by crucifixion and stoning.

As for St. James, the Lesser, well, his name says it all. He is known as, "The Lesser," to distinguish him from James the Greater, the brother of John. James the Lesser was probably either younger or shorter than the other James. And as for what he did, we know nothing. Church tradition about him is so self-contradictory that no one can decipher any solid truth from it.

I suppose you could say that he was a good son because, if nothing else, he got his parents' names in the Bible. And not everyone can say that! We know that his mother's name was Mary, because in Matthew 27:55 and Mark 15:40 she is said to be at the cross. (This is a nice touch, although it's a bit of a pain. There are at least four Marys in the New Testament. James'

mother Mary, Jesus' mother Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus.) James' father was named Alphaeus. We pick that up from the lists of the twelve apostles. And that's about all we know.

But of course it's not important to know much about these men. And as their understanding of Christ broadened and their faith matured I suspect they learned that earthly acclaim didn't matter much. In fact it didn't matter at all. Philip and James are called "apostles". "Apostle" is one of these words that we use in church but don't know what it really means. Apostle means "to send out". Jesus sent out his apostles to teach and preach and share the good news. Being an apostle wasn't a status one carried with pride. It was an important role to be carried out. Their role was the same as our role; to witness to the love of God in Jesus.

In the gospel reading Philip says to Jesus, "Show us the Father and we will be satisfied." Jesus replies, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

If you were here on Good Friday you may remember the sermon about the fullness of God dwelling in Jesus. And that was more than just a philosophical claim. In Jesus we have the full and ultimate revelation of God. No one can come along and say there's additional things about God you need to know. And God did not send prophets or priests or angels with the revelation. God came himself to reveal himself to us.

This is hard to grasp. It was hard for Philip to grasp, and it was probably hard for all the apostles. This normal appearing man they called Jesus of Nazareth couldn't be the fullness of God. Shouldn't he look more holy? Shouldn't he glow like Moses glowed? Shouldn't everyone who looks at him die instantly because they've seen the face of God? Oh, they believed him to be a prophet and a miracle worker, but not God's presence.

But Jesus was God walking on this earth as a normal human being. He had come to experience life as a human and to reveal his will. Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God. That is why

he can say, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Those words come just before where our gospel reading begins for today. It is that statement that prompts Philip to say, "Lord, show us the Father..." If Philip and James were any good at being apostles at all, they learned how to teach about such a statement.

Jesus did not intend this to be an exclusive statement meaning that all Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and every other religion to ever develop are damned to hell. Some Christians take it that way, but I think that is wrong. What it does mean is that God has made himself available to you. You know the mind of God because it has been revealed to you through Jesus. This revelation is not complex. It doesn't take a degree in anything to understand. In fact it takes no intellect at all. The revelation is the cross and the love it represents. That's it. That all we need to have.

As Christians we, alongside Philip and James and all the others sent by Christ, show by our words and actions that we

have faith and confidence in the goodness and love of God. It is not our place to puff ourselves up. Nor is it our place to judge others or look down upon them. Instead we know we have received a great promise and we share it with those we meet.

I think every moment is a moment of evangelism; it is a moment to witness to God's revelation through Jesus. Notice something interesting in verse 11. Jesus says, "Believe in me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe in me because of the works themselves."

When we hear that I think our thoughts immediately think these "works" Jesus is talking about him doing are miracles. He then is saying to Philip, "Look, you don't believe me? I've proven it to you. I've done miracles. Believe in me because of them." But that is not what Jesus said. Jesus said his "works", and his works are not the same as his miracles, which would be called "signs" in John's gospel.

I think a lot of Jesus ministry wasn't the splashy miracles and amazing sermons. That's the stuff that the Bible records,

but there is was also a lot of simple good works and being with people. These are Jesus' works.

When Jesus says, "Very truly I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father," he does not mean that his disciples or those who follow him, like ourselves, will do great miracles. He means the everyday ordinary acts that we do that witness to the fact that we believe Jesus was God's ultimate revelation. And that revelation was love.

Philip and James don't get a lot of press coverage in the Bible. But they were effective workers in God's kingdom effectively living the love of Christ. May we be like them in our commitment and faith. Amen