

St. James Day, 2023

We are here today to celebrate our patronal feast, the feast of St. James the Great, or as we call him around here, St. James the Fisherman, the first martyr.

King Herod Agrippa, grandson of Herod the Great, had James beheaded in 44 AD.

When Herod saw that this pleased the crowds, he had Peter arrested, as well.

In other words, the death of James and the arrest of Peter were political stunts.

They served no ethical purpose whatsoever, but were calculated to increase Herod's popularity, Herod's power.

(We should always be mindful of the stunts of those seeking power.

It is pure manipulation, and it works as well today as it did under Herod Agrippa.)

In the terms of last week's homily, Herod mistook surviving for thriving, that is, he thought the more he could control, the better off he would be and thus led a life with very little meaning.

He could not answer, in other words, my Japanese history professor's question that she always put to us students: "So what?"

"Herod, you were the King of Judea, a real crowd pleaser. So what?"

I imagine that, although the "so what" question does not make an equal impression on all people during their lives, it nevertheless presses on almost everyone at the time of his or her death.

It is better for us to consider it earlier.

Last week, we talked about nonsense words like “brillig” and “slithy.”

What I neglected to say at the time was that they still *seem* like they have meaning in the context of a sentence.

They both seem like adjectives in the poem from which they are taken: “’Twas brillig and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe.”

The sentence has a certain majesty to it, yet it means nothing.

Imagine leading a life that seemed to have meaning, but in fact had none, a life that appeared grand, but that was empty because it was not deeply related to anything but self, a life that lacked compassion, relationship, responsibility.

For those who are mesmerized by the Herod’s of the world, it will seem that James’ death was a waste and that we are morbid for focusing on it, but James died for much more than King Herod’s political agenda.

James was a martyr, a word that means witness.

He witnessed to the way of love, to the value of living a life full of meaning.

If you have ever wondered how the martyrs did it, how they stuck it out to the bitter end, as we say, when they became caught up in someone’s meaningless political maneuvering, it was because they knew, and not just knew, but experienced the power of living a life of meaning.

Martyrs did not do it, in other words, for some heavenly reward later, a kind of suffer now, reap benefits later plan that some branches of Christianity promote.

They did it because, in the moment, they were aware that it was better to be **un**comfortable yet live a life with meaning than to be comfortable and have no meaning.

In our present culture, the great number of those who are comfortable yet have no meaning has led to an epidemic of loneliness, depression, and anxiety.

We have been so inculcated with assumptions that justify life without meaning that we have trouble even recognizing the source of the problem.

We have been told, for example, that the universe is mechanical and that consciousness exists inside our heads as the result of some chemical activity.

There is no evidence for this.

No one has been able to find consciousness in there.

They nevertheless convince themselves that it ceases to be if the brain is destroyed.

If they never saw it in the first place, how do they know that it has been extinguished?

And this, even though numerous people who have died and come back report having maintained conscious perception throughout the experience.

Telling ourselves that consciousness is trapped in our heads cuts us off from the rest of the world.

It hinders us from relating.

A much better model understands that consciousness is somehow temporarily related to the body, but reaches out to the things that it considers.

My consciousness is reaching out to you right now.

Our thoughts effect the noosphere, as French Jesuit and philosopher, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin called it, the realm of all consciousness, the state of interconnected awareness among all minds.

Others in the noosphere are affected by what we contribute.

When rats learn something in one lab, they very quickly pick it up in other labs the world over.

The great consciousness in which they also participate has somehow developed.

One loving consciousness is like a candle lit in a dark room, and darkness cannot overcome the light.

Our consciousness, the seat of our being, reaches towards one another and intermingles in a most beautiful way.

Understanding this at some level, James followed the way of love to the very end.

Though his body died, his flame was never put out, but lit the flames of others whom he had never met.

With this clearer conception of consciousness, we can understand better the nature of prayer.

Through prayer, we transform our consciousness so that it more readily connects with the world, sheds light, spreads love.

Prayer first transforms ourselves, in other words, and then the world.

This is why we Episcopalians say that we pray what we believe.

Our beliefs are not mere intellectual principles to which we subscribe.

Our prayers are who we are, how we exist in relation to others.

I am talking to you now, but also praying for you, and I hope that you are praying for me.

The scientific method works well to test hypotheses, but how do we even come up with those hypotheses?

The same way people all over the world managed to identify plants that contain caffeine.

In the Americas, it was chocolate.

In the east, it was tea.

In the Arabic world, it was coffee, and those three soon spread around the world.

How did they know to test these three plants out of the millions of species?

People did not go randomly one by one.

They had a hypothesis that was informed by their being connected to the world.

They sensed it, then tested it, and loved it.

So many wonderful scientific discoveries were made through intuition.

Some were called “accidents,” like the discovery of penicillin or the effect of
microwaves.

One wonders how accidental these were.

Others were clearly the product of intuition, like the discovery of the benzene ring in a
dream.

If we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that our ideas simply appear.

We do not construct them as one builds an engine or bakes a cake.

People ask me where I get the ideas for homilies.

They just come.

I do not construct them, or more accurately, when I try to, I make a mess of it.

I attempt to let the noosphere, or as we say, the Holy Spirit speak through me.

Some days I do better than others.

Of course, we can tell ourselves that we are disconnected from others, have a
mechanistic relationship to them.

This is precisely what evil wants us to believe so that it can drive us back into ourselves.

Evil turns us inward, makes us lose our awareness of our profound connection with the great consciousness to become isolated, self-conscious, insecure, afraid, withdrawn, anxious.

Rupert Sheldrake argues that the prevailing metaphor for the universe, a soulless machine, should be abandoned for that of a developing organism.

In Christian terms, we say that we are a part of the great consciousness of God, a developing and growing part of the source of all life.

Consciousness reaches out, interchanges, transforms.

Together we can do beautiful things.

A person who understands this has no need for conquest or power beyond what is needed for self-preservation.

Do not let people imprison you in your skull.

We are part of a great organism that is fueled by light and love.

It is developing, growing, deeply interconnected.

James was unwilling to mislead people about this beautiful dance of consciousness.

He refused to cast a shadow, and the darkness of Herod only made James' light stand out more.

Our lights penetrate the universe.

Happy Feast of St. James.