

Being Jesus' Kin

St. James' Church, Parkton • St. James of Jerusalem • Tobias Haller BSG

Acts 15:12-22a; Psalm 1; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Matthew 13:54-58

Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us?+

First of all let me say what a pleasure it is to be here at Saint James Church Parkton, and to bring the icon of your patron saint to be dedicated as a reminder and — I hope — inspiration to all of you, an inspiration and a reminder to stand fast in witness to the Gospel come what may.

I will get to the import of that Gospel in a moment, but first want to reflect with you about something a bit more prosaic. I'm not going to try to settle the historic question about exactly what people meant or understood by calling James, "the brother of the Lord." Whether that meant he was Jesus' full younger brother (as a later child of Mary and Joseph); or older half-brother (as a child of Joseph by a former marriage); or, as some think, a cousin or other more distant relation — in the long run it doesn't matter what the *exact* relationship was. Because whatever it was, the people of his hometown compared Jesus to his relatives, standing him up against his relations, calling out some of them, including James, by name.

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What they were doing was saying, "Well, the rest of his family is no great shakes, so where does Jesus get it?" Think what it would have been like if people had known Billy Carter before they ever heard of Jimmy — two men who, though brothers, could hardly be more different from each other in terms of temperament or talent. But that was the crowd's experience in Jesus' home town — they saw him through the lens of the kin they knew, and that made it impossible for them to see how extraordinary Jesus was. Familiarity didn't just breed contempt, but made it impossible for him to work many deeds of power there, as disbelief based on familiarity undermined the foundation of faith.

There is, of course, another side to the comparison: the side of Jesus' relatives. I don't know if any of you have ever experienced it, but I'm sure you can imagine what it's like to have a famous relative. It can be a strain, as people come to expect, once they find out your sister or brother is a famous author or athlete or performer, that you must have a similar gift — and they put you on the spot with their unreasonable expectations. I think of the presidential campaigns towards the end of which we now (at last!) find ourselves, and try to imagine how all of the candidates' relatives must feel about being put into the spotlight of public perusal, placed under the microscope — or in front of the *microphone* — as if they and not their spouse or brother or sister was the one running for office.

So you can imagine what it must have felt like for James, and Mary and all the others. They were small-town folks who most of the time minded their business and kept out of the doings of their brother and son, making a name for himself throughout the countryside. You may recall that the one time they tried to intervene in Jesus' ministry, came about because people were beginning to say he was crazy, and they mounted a half-hearted intervention.

And it was at that point that Jesus suddenly expanded his family, turning from the merely biological to the spiritual. For he *asked* the crowds, “Who is my mother and my brother?” And he *told* the crowds, “Whoever does the will of God is my mother and brother and sister.” And that, my friends, includes us, even us, in the here and now. We are Jesus’ kin.

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But back to James, who whether brother, half-brother, or cousin, was kin of some sort in the then and there of Jesus’ own lifetime. As we know, he joined his family who thought Jesus had a screw loose, and tried to help his mother and the rest of the family get him under control. And yet, after Jesus’ death, he shows up as an important leader in the church, clearly, as the reading from Acts shows us, the spokesperson for the assembly, the one who reaches the conclusion — a real “decider” — and on the strength of whose summing-up the Apostles accept the decision that the Gentiles are not to be bound by the Law of Moses.

We hear that rather matter-of-factly, with the retrospect of the rest of Acts and two thousand years of church history — but at the time it was an audacious move — and not everyone in the early church was happy with it. Some continued the pressure to require circumcision and obedience to the Law of Moses for all Gentile Christian converts. As Paul’s letters attest, this was a major bone of contention for decades to come.

Still, at that gathering, James took that bold step, and acted as the principle authority, as the first bishop of Jerusalem, a guardian of the unity of the church which was about to be compromised by the new tension placed upon it: the tension created by admitting Gentiles to its fellowship.

James was also among the earliest martyrs for the Christian faith — according to early church historians, thrown from the pinnacle of the Temple (which you can see in the background of the icon) and beaten to death in the court below, when he would not dissuade the people from accepting Jesus as the Messiah.

What a difference! Clearly *something* happened to James between the time he thought his brother was crazy and the time we see him as a leader of the church, and hear of him as a martyr to the faith.

Historians differ as to *when* the change in James came about, but we know that *it did come*. Was it during Jesus’ preaching ministry? Was he perhaps converted by hearing some golden teaching from his brother’s lips, to be as astounded as the crowds from his hometown were at first, suddenly struck with the challenging question, “Where did he get this wisdom?” and recognizing that it could only come from above?

Was it from hearing of Jesus’ final days in Jerusalem, of how he endured the way of the cross, and bore its weight, and perished on that green hill far away? Or was it from hearing the word brought by the women to the others — the word that death had not conquered after all, and that Jesus was risen from the dead?

Or was it in that more personal experience, that first-hand experience, the one Paul wrote of, when Jesus appeared to James after his resurrection, and, like Thomas and the others, James came to believe because he had seen the risen Lord, not simply his brother now, but his Lord and his God?

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Whatever the time and place and circumstance, James entered into a new

relationship with Jesus at that point. Although a relative by flesh and blood, he became a brother of Christ in Spirit, when he became a Christian.

In doing this he became part of that larger family that includes us too — for all of us here are brothers and sisters of Jesus, by adoption, through the waters of baptism. I can tell you from personal experience as a pastor that many people come to Christ kicking and screaming, and I've wrestled with a few! Some of you may be such cradle Christians; others may have come to faith in youth or adolescence, or even in adulthood.

But all of us who did not walk with Christ, like Paul himself, are untimely born; and though untimely born, still *we are born indeed* — born again through water and the Spirit, into our new family of faith. And yes, it is a matter of flesh and blood as well — for in the Eucharist we partake of our dear Lord Jesus' Body and Blood, as a reminder and a realization that he is in us, and we in him. We are no longer orphans, no longer strangers and foreigners — but through the work of the Holy Spirit that led James and the other Apostles to see that salvation was open to us Gentiles — we have been adopted into kinship with Jesus. We have made Parkton his hometown as well as Nazareth, by inviting him into our hearts even as he invites us to this table. We have listened to his teaching in the Scripture, and unlike the folks of that far off time and place, we do not challenge or disbelieve him on the basis of our knowledge of ourselves and each other as less than perfect people — as if to say, God wouldn't be caught dead among that sort. Rather we give thanks that through grace and grace alone we have been saved, and brought into that great family that spans the globe and fills all time — and what a grand family reunion we will one day share!

Let no one dismiss or challenge us, seek to put us down or demean us by comparison, for however humble our birth, however far we may have fallen through our own wanderings and mischance, Christ our Lord has raised us up, and will raise us higher still. For Jesus is our kin, our brother and our savior, our Lord and our God. O come, let us adore him.+