

Homily for Saint Philip and Saint James, Apostles May 1, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*2 Corinthians 4:1–6; Psalm 119:33–40; John 14:5–14**

Saint Philip is named as one of the twelve in all four gospels and in Luke's second book, the Acts of the Apostles. Today's gospel lesson is from John's narrative of the supper before the Passover. Philip and Thomas who, in the end, will doubt the words of resurrection that he hears, will see, and will believe, team up with Jesus with questions, demands, for Jesus. Where are you going? Show us the Father. That will make everything all right. They do not believe as they will come to believe.

On Monday this week, the appointed gospel included this question to Jesus from people among the five thousand he had fed, “ ‘What must we do, to be doing the works of God?’ Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.’ ”¹ For John the evangelist it comes down to faith, to belief in the Word made flesh.

In the Acts of the Apostles, after the stoning of Stephen, Philip goes Samaria and there he continues Jesus' own ministry of preaching “good news about

¹ John 6:28–29.

the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ.”² He cast out demons and healed “many who were paralyzed or lame.”³ When the people there believed, he baptized them.

Just yesterday our first lesson from Acts was the continuation of its account of Philip’s ministry, teaching and baptizing the Ethiopian, a eunuch and an African. Luke’s account concludes with these words, perhaps echoing the story of Elijah being taken up into heaven in by the chariot and horses of fire, perhaps an echo of the mysteries of resurrection and of the Second Coming of the Christ: “And when [Philip and the Ethiopian] came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught up Philip; and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip was found at Azo'tus, and passing on he preached the gospel to all the towns till he came to Caesare'a.”⁴ In Acts, Luke shows the apostles continuing the ministry of Jesus.

There are two apostles named James in Mark, Matthew, and Luke. No James is named in John’s gospel. The one traditionally called Saint James the

² Acts 8:12.

³ Acts 8:7.

⁴ Acts 8:39–40.

Great is James the brother of John, both sons of Zebedee. This James is the only apostle whose death is recorded in the New Testament, “About that time Herod the king laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword.”⁵ His feast day is July 25.

“Saint James the Less” is James the son of Alphaeus, again, mentioned in Mark, Matthew, and Luke. This James may have another mention. In these gospels, in addition to Mary Magdalene and other women, a Mary the mother of James is mentioned—but a relationship to James the son of Alphaeus isn’t at all certain.⁶

A James is mentioned in Acts after the martyrdom of James the son of Alphaeus. Paul identifies this James in his Letter to the Galatians as “the Lord’s brother.”⁷ It’s worth noting that this James’ place, and not Simon Peter’s, to make a decision about how gentiles will be admitted to the community of believers.⁸

In his commentary on the 1928 Prayer Book, Massey Shepherd said the origin of this feast of Saint Philip

⁵ Acts 12:1–2.

⁶ Mark 15:40; Matthew 27:56; Luke 24:10.

⁷ Galatians 1:19.

⁸ Acts 15:12–21.

and Saint James is the dedication of a basilica in Rome and the placing of the “supposed relics” of these apostles during the pontificate of John III,⁹ from the year 561 until his death on July 13, 574.¹⁰

Since 1979 we no longer hear Cranmer’s collect for today. It was modified to be the collect for the Fifth Sunday of Easter and a new one was composed for today. I’d like to close with the older collect in traditional language:

*O Almighty God, whom truly to know is everlasting life; Grant us perfectly to know thy Son Jesus Christ to be the way, the truth, and the life; that, following the steps of thy holy Apostles, Saint Philip and Saint James, we may stedfastly walk in the way that leadeth to eternal life; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*¹¹

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⁹ Massey H. Shepherd, Jr., *The Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 238–39.

¹⁰ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-III-pope>, (accessed 1 May 2020).

¹¹ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1928), 238–39.