

Homily for Saint James the Apostle

July 25, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Acts 11:27–12:3; Psalm 7:1–10; Matthew 20:20–28

One of the surprises Father Jay Smith and I have shared since we began our live-stream ministry has been taking the time to write out our weekday homilies. EBSCO is an Alabama corporation that, among other things, is involved with digital media. Among its businesses is a website called the “Atlas Religious Database®.” My seminary, along with many others, makes it possible for its alumni to access the collection of articles from theological journals.

This morning I went to the website and typed in “Saint James the Apostle.” An article that caught my attention was “Luke and the Foundations of the Church.”¹ It’s by Peter Scaer, professor of exegetical theology at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Concordia is a seminary of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

Because of the Christian community’s historical trajectory in the West, Matthew is regarded as the

¹ Peter J. Scaer, “Luke and the Foundations of the Church,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 76 (2012), 57–72.

Church's gospel.² Matthew has Jesus' words about Simon being the rock on which the Lord will build his Church.³ It concludes with the Risen Jesus sending out the apostles to all nations.⁴

That said, the word usually translated as Church—*ekklesia*—appears only twice in Matthew. Luke's second book, the Acts of the Apostles, is all about the life of the Church after Jesus' ascension. It appears twenty-three times in Acts.

In his commentary on the Acts of the Apostles, Luke Timothy Johnson, professor of New Testament and Christian Origins at Emory, writes, “Luke obviously considers the Holy Spirit itself to be the ‘life-principle’ of the Church.”⁵ Along with Paul's letters, it is in Acts that we learn about the life, the struggles, and the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the people who would come to be called Christians.

At the beginning Acts, the Risen Jesus' last words to his apostles before ascending to the Father were, “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come

² Ibid., 57.

³ Matthew 16:18.

⁴ Matthew 28:16–20.

⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), 15.

upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.”⁶

There are three disciples named James: James, the son of Alphaeus, known as James the Less, James, Brother of the Lord, and James, the brother of John, sons of Zebedee. This James is known as James the Great.

Matthew follows Mark in telling the story of Jesus calling his first disciples.⁷ As Jesus walks along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he first comes to the brothers Simon and Andrew and says to them, “ ‘Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men [and women].”⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him.”⁹ Jesus, Simon, and Andrew then pass the boat of Zebedee. Mark tells us, “And immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and followed him.”¹⁰

⁶ Acts 1:8.

⁷ Mark 1:16–20; Matthew 4:18–22.

⁸ The Greek is inclusive.

⁹ Mark 1:17–18.

¹⁰ Mark 1:20.

Peter, James, and John are “witnesses to [Jesus’] Transfiguration, the raising of Jairus’ daughter, and of [Jesus’] agony in the garden.”¹¹

In Acts, we read, “[Herod] killed James the brother of John with the sword.”¹² His is the only martyrdom among the twelve recorded in the New Testament. In the last chapter of John, the Risen Jesus alludes to Peter’s death, without giving a location.¹³

I think it’s worth remembering the terrible dislocation and suffering for Jews and Christians when Jewish leaders began a military revolt against Rome in the year 66. Jerusalem will be destroyed in the year 70. The last holdouts at the desert fortress Masada committed suicide in the year 73—only two women and five children were found alive.¹⁴

I want to conclude by reading three short verses of a sixth-century Latin hymn praising Christ for the holy martyrs. This is the English translation of these verses in from *The Hymnal 1982*:

¹¹ *Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2006* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2006), 318.

¹² Acts 12:2.

¹³ John 21:18–19.

¹⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Masada>, (accessed 25 July 2020).

*King of the martyrs' noble band, crown of the true of every land,
strength of the pilgrim on the way, beacon by night and cloud by
day:*

*Hear us as now we celebrate faith undeterred by cruel hate; hear
and forgive us, sinners who are burdened by the wrong we do.*

*Dying, through thee they overcame; living, were faithful to thy
Name. Turn our rebellious heart, and thus win a like victory in
us.*

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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