

Arnhem, midweek May 1st 2025. St. James and St. Philip - Revd Dorienke de Vries
Readings: Isaiah 30.18-22, Psalm 119.1-9, John 14.1-14

Today we remember two apostles of Jesus; St. James and St. Philip. Two of the twelve Jesus chose to be with him throughout his ministry. Two of the twelve he sent into the world to proclaim the gospel and to make disciples of all nations.

Of course it went without saying that both James and Philip would make it to the saints' calendar. But the thing with saints' days is that we are supposed to learn something from the saints we remember. We are supposed to be inspired by their lives, and encouraged by their examples. Well, if that is the case, we are in trouble today. Because we have to remember two people of whom we know next to nothing at all.

We all know the famous apostles: Peter, James, John. Some of us might be able to mention one or two others from the top of their heads. Judas, of course – the *infamous* one. But where has the rest gone? These people, chosen by Jesus for such an important role in the early church, how come they have never made it into the Bible or the history books? If they wrote any letters, we have never seen them. If they undertook dangerous journeys, we have never heard the stories. Sometimes there are legends around them, but whether they are true or fantasy is not always clear. They may have founded churches in faraway places, we do not know. We do not know how the Lord has used them for his saving work.

As for James and Philip, whom we remember today, it takes more time to say who they were not, than to tell anything concrete about them. James was not the James of the three famous apostles mentioned earlier. He is also not the one who wrote the famous letter of St. James. He is just James, appearing in the list of the twelve. To avoid confusion, he is often called James the Lesser, which is not very nice to have for a nickname.

About Philip we know a little bit more. He was one of Jesus' first disciples, and the one who introduced Nathanael to him. And in today's gospel reading we hear him speak. But he is not the same as the Philip who was sent to the Ethiopian eunuch to explain the readings from Isaiah to him. After the resurrection the majority of the apostles disappears from the records.

That is strange. Because the church has been built on the foundation laid by the apostles. Their witness and their ministry were key to the development of the early church. When we were baptized we promised to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship. But nine out of twelve are strangers to us!

What to make of this?

Let's have a look at the church today. The church today has its own so-called famous people. Names that are familiar to everyone. Pope Francis. Former archbishops, like Rowan Williams and Justin Welby. Our own bishop Robert Innes. People who are very visible in their role as ministers of the church. People who write books and speak at conferences and synods. Their ministry is important, and can inspire many.

But the majority of Christians will remain unknown beyond their own small circle. The majority of those who were called to the ministry will maybe serve a few churches in their life-time, and do so as best as they can. But beyond that hardly anyone will know them, and they are quickly forgotten. And so it goes for all of us, whatever our life-calling looks like. We do our thing. We live our Christian life. We follow Jesus as best as we can. We may inspire a neighbour or a family member. We are a lit candle in our own corner of this dark world. And that's it.

I think it is glorious that we, as simple, everyday Christians, share this fate with the majority of Jesus' apostles. I have a feeling that it is deliberate that they did not all become famous. That they were

quickly forgotten. Because that is how Jesus wants his church to be: a place of simple, everyday people, who just do their best, who are not special or famous or important, but do spread light in their own small corner. We may need big names to keep us organized. But the real work is done behind the scenes. There where you are. There where we are together, as a small and fragile community. Where nothing spectacular happens – that is to say, if you only pay attention to what your eyes see.

‘Show us the Father’, is Philip’s question in the gospel reading today. ‘Show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.’ And Jesus replies: ‘Look at me. I am in the Father, and the Father is in me. Whoever has seen me, has seen the Father.’ And it goes even beyond that. Because Jesus says that this goes for all of us who follow him. Through the Holy Spirit the Father is in us, too. And so it is the core of our calling: that we show the Father to the people around us. Not that we become famous, or can perform miracles, or draw hundreds of people to church. But that we shine with God. That whoever has seen us has seen the Father. Now if that isn’t spectacular, I don’t know what is.

And so these two unknown apostles inspire us to be just us. Inspire us by being not famous. Inspire us by being like us. May we be like them. May we follow Christ and be faithful to him in the simple and everyday lives he has called us to live.

Amen.