

The Sons of Zebedee



Mark 9:2 "Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves."

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, along with Simon Peter, were Jesus' closest friends. They formed an inner circle within the Twelve Apostles; a sort of 'in group' within the 'in group.' Indeed, Jesus even had nicknames for these three members of his inner circle; Jesus called Simon; Cephas or Peter, meaning "the Rock" in Greek or Aramaic, and James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Jesus called "Boanerges" or "the sons of thunder" (Mk. 3:17), presumably because of the incident in Luke's Gospel when the two of them wanted to call down lightning

upon a village of Samaritans who would not receive Jesus (Lk. 9:54).

Jesus' special relationship with Peter, John and James can also be seen in those various occasions in the Gospels when Jesus allowed the three of them to be a part of the story, but not any of the others of the twelve apostles. According to Matthew's Gospel, Jesus took only Peter, John, and James up the Mountain of Transfiguration where they witnessed Jesus' appearance transformed before them, where Jesus' face shone like the sun and his clothes were dazzling white, and where suddenly Moses and Elijah appeared talking to Jesus and they heard then a voice from heaven (Mt. 17.1). Similarly, according to the Gospel of Mark, when Jesus went into the house to raise Jairus' daughter from the dead, Jesus let no one follow him in except Peter, John, and James (Mk. 5.37). And in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus led Peter and John and James away from the others as he prayed there, and then Jesus returned to this elite group several times to rouse them from their sleep while he suffered in agony.

Earlier when it was time to prepare for that Passover, Jesus had sent Peter and John into the village to make the preparations. These two remain close after "Herod the king" (usually identified with Herod Agrippa) had James executed by the sword according to the Acts of the Apostles. Thereafter

Peter and John often appear together, where for instance they healed the lame man at the Temple Gate and were then themselves arrested by the Temple priests. When the Apostles in Jerusalem heard that the word of God was being accepted in Samaria, the Apostles sent Peter and John to them to investigate. Thus St. Paul writing to the Galatians declares that these three, Peter, John and James were "pillars" of the early church, and that they had given 'the right hand of fellowship' to Paul and Barnabas (Gal. 2.9). So clearly, John and James, the sons of Zebedee, along with Simon Peter, were identified leaders of the early Christian Church, distinct in some way from the other Apostles.

Yet they were more than a tight-knit group of disciples. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were, according to Luke's Gospel (5.10), fishing partners with Simon Peter, which is why these three were so close. These men then were not strangers to one another, but a band of brothers and business partners, who accompanied Jesus wherever he went from the very beginning of his public ministry. It might also be noted that Salome, the wife of Zebedee and mother therefore of John and James, was also a follower of Jesus (cf. Mk. 15:40, Mt. 27:56) for she is listed among the company of women from Galilee who accompanied Jesus and cared for him. Mark names Salome with the other women at the Crucifixion and later at the grave on Easter morning (Mk. 15:40, 16:1). Matthew does not explicitly name her on these occasions

but identifies her only as the mother of James and John. The Fourth Gospel on these occasions, however, appears to identify her also as the sister of Jesus' mother (Jn. 19:25). That would make Salome Jesus' aunt, and James and John, his cousins, which may be why they were part of the inner circle of Apostles with their fishing partner Simon Peter, and which may also explain why James and John sought on one occasion to sit on their cousin Jesus' right hand and on his left in his glorious Kingdom. For among Jesus' twelve disciples, they were more than Jesus' friends or disciples, they were his relations.

John and James, the sons of Zebedee, along with Simon Peter, were thus Jesus' most intimate companions. And yet even these members of Jesus' inner circle, these members of his family, didn't really understand him or his ministry. They didn't really understand what was happening, as in today's Gospel where Peter speaks, not knowing what to say, for they were all terrified.

My point today, however, is if those who were closest to Jesus, if those who were part of his inner circle, part of his family, if they didn't really understand him, if they didn't really comprehend the nature of his promised kingdom of God, if they didn't really foresee what lay ahead for them, or what kind of ministry Jesus was really talking about, if they didn't understand --- how can we with much confidence claim that we do?

In the end, I have no problem declaring that we can't be certain in our theological proclamations, that we ourselves continue to struggle to understand and interpret Jesus' message even today; that we still labor to follow in his footsteps, to understand what is required of us, what we should do, and what the Kingdom of God is all about, and thus how can we make sense of the various conflicting claims and interpretations among Christians, both then and now. I have no problem saying that.

But many Christians do have a problem saying that. Many Christians insist upon certainty in their religious declarations. Many Christians boldly claim that they understand what Jesus meant, that they clearly know what Jesus wants from us, definite in their views, they know exactly what we must believe, and then they fearlessly declare their perceptions about who he was. Thus, it seems to me that what plagues the Church today, just as it plagued it back then in Jesus' day, even among Jesus' closest friends, was that egoistical sense of self-assurance --- that confident self-righteousness that divides and infects the Church today, just as it made the other ten Apostles angry with John and James on several occasions back then. It seems to me that what we need, among the followers of Jesus, is a lot less self-righteousness, and a lot more humility, whether those followers be his closest friends, or us.

AMEN.