

JULY 25 2025 FATHER MICHAEL COUTTS

The late Pope Francis said that priests who are shepherds of their people should smell like sheep.

St. James — or James and John and Peter and Andrew — were fishermen, and they had a fishy flavour around them. But they would no longer fish for the catch, the fruit of the sea. Rather, they would fish for men and women for the kingdom of God.

When Jesus called James and his brother John, they were most generous. Jesus said, "You cannot be my followers unless you hate your mother, your father, your brothers, your sisters." Not hate, but put them first above the kingdom of God.

James and John definitely did not do so. They left Zebedee, they left their nets, they left their boats, and they came generously to follow Jesus. They were full of enthusiasm and full of fire, so much so that Jesus would call them sons of thunder. They were also full of ambition.

They wanted to sit at the right and left hand, though they did not seem to have a backbone. They had to send their mother to ask Jesus to let them sit at his right and left hand.

Now, Jesus did not dampen down their spirit. In fact, he channelled them very carefully towards the kingdom of God.

There are three beautiful, very powerful, and foundational experiences that Jesus led these three — Peter, James, and John — into the kingdom of God.

The first was when Jairus asked Jesus to raise his daughter from death to life. Actually, he asked Jesus to heal her, but when Jesus came there, she

had already died — the 12-year-old daughter. Jesus sent everybody out but took Peter, James, and John, and raised the daughter of Jairus to life.

This was an experience they had, but they did not know how to sift it. It assured them that Jesus was going to be the hand of God to raise the dead to life. It was a matter of death and life, and Jesus would be the hand.

The second beautiful experience was on Mount Tabor, as we call it, when Jesus took them up to the mountain and he was transfigured in their sight. There was Moses, who stood for the law, and Elijah, who stood for the prophets.

He was transfigured, and Jesus was trying to tell his apostles: great as this is, there is a new covenant, and Jesus would be the new law — "Love one another as I have loved you." Jesus would also be a prophet, a person who would speak in God's name about the love of God to everybody.

Jesus would say, "As you see me do, you would do as well." But as yet, they still could not figure it all out. They had to wait until Pentecost before they could sort it.

Great as it was — death to life, and the glory of the kingdom — there was a price to be paid. That would be the last experience, in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Here was the man who had brought death to life, who had been glorious, and here he was, a pitiful man in pain, in suffering, in agony. This was the price he had to pay. Yet, Jesus would say, "Let this chalice pass me by, but not my will, but your will be done."

It was a staggering experience.

All these three put together began to show them that in order to proclaim the kingdom of God, in order to receive life everlasting, in order to have the glory that they wanted — to sit at the right and left hand — there was a price to be paid. And they paid it willingly.

We heard in the first reading today about despair, discouragement, and all these things. But we will never give up. And they never gave up.

We have the Apostle James proclaiming the kingdom of God with an enthusiasm that is described in the Acts of the Apostles. We are told in the Acts of the Apostles that Peter preached in Gaza and preached in Jaffa, all the way down to Caesarea Maritima. Paul preached in Asia Minor to the Gentiles.

But the people who were held together in Jerusalem were held by James, the brother of John. He held the people together.

These were the apostles that went out and had these charismatic speeches: Christ has died, Christ is living, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again. We hear that at first there were 3,000, and later 5,000, who joined the believers.

The person who kept them together, united as a shepherd would keep the flock together, was James the Apostle. But he was killed, the very first of the apostles. Not the first martyr — the first martyr was Stephen. James was the first of the apostles to be killed at the whim of Herod.

That would be a history that would repeat itself again and again. Despots and rulers would kill people at their whim. We have Charles Lwanga killed in Uganda. We have the archbishop of El Salvador killed by the rulers in El Salvador just because they did not like Archbishop Romero.

What about James? What do we know about him? Very little.

Legend says that he went all the way to India, to the south state of Kerala. The Syro-Malankara and Syro-Malabar Rites, united with the Church, held James as one of their patrons. Many Catholics in this state are called James.

The other famous place is in Spain, where we have the shrine of Santiago de Compostela — St. James in the Field of Stars. People make their pilgrimages to these places.

Whatever legend you choose to believe, St. James leads us on with a generosity that is unbelievable.

St. James the Apostle, pray for us.