

From the First Lesson of the Day: "After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me . . . My judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God." [Acts 15.13, 19]

From the Holy Gospel: "Is this not the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?" [Matthew 13.55]

Today we mark the minor feast celebrating the person and role of a disciple and apostle of Jesus by the name of James. There are three different men named James who are listed among the apostles in various New Testament citations. There is the James who is the brother of Peter, both sons of Zebedee, and who was martyred at the hands of King Herod. The James we hear of in the readings today is without doubt James the Bishop of Jerusalem (Acts 12:17, 15:13, 21:18; Galatians 1:19; 2:9-12), and he is the author of the Epistle that bears his name, and he is the James who is martyred in A.D. 62. He also known as James the Less (Mark 15:40), so named to distinguish him from James the Great. The James we ponder today is also known as James the brother of Jesus – and here there is a great debate as to whether James and his three brothers, together called "the brothers of Jesus," are biological sons of Joseph and Mary, or of Joseph by a previous marriage, who then is a widower when he marries the blessed virgin, Mary – that debate will need to be dealt with at another time; and finally there is a third James, called the

James the son of Alpheus (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13).

So, in conclusion, the James that we honor today is "the step-brother of the Lord," therefore the one also known as James the first leader, or Bishop of the Church, in Jerusalem.

I.

The first recorded formal conflict in the fledgling New Testament Church referred to in Acts and Galatians undoubtedly was an unsettling experience. Imagine – conflict in the church! Here we find it recorded in the Scriptures. No wonder we find it in our own life experiences today.

The conflict in the earliest days of the church so serious that the first church counsel was called. The church leadership in Jerusalem was there, and so were representatives from churches far from Jerusalem, and so were the well-known missionaries, Paul and Barnabas, out on Paul's first missionary journey.

So, what was the cause of discord in the church that brought about this council? As Luke records in it Acts 15: Some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." The question concerned

circumcision, but really, it concerned the broader question as to the Jewish law: Does the Jewish law apply to Gentile converts, or not? The new Christians who were Jewish believed that it was necessary to fulfill the Old Testament laws of daily life. The leadership, led by Christ's chosen apostles, were divided. The conflict was so great, and so significant, that the leaders in Jerusalem called all of the leadership of the growing church to return to Jerusalem for a church meeting, to become known through history as "The Jerusalem Council."

This Jerusalem Council at that time consisted of the remaining apostles – those who had not yet been martyred, plus John who alone escape martyrdom – and the chosen elders, or we might call them church leaders or church rulers, from around the New Testament world. Included in the gathering were Paul and Barnabas, who cut short their missionary journey to attend.

It wasn't long into the meeting when things turned raucous, such that it brought the apostle Peter to his feet: "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the Gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart,

bore witness to them by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and He made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. Now therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they well."

Wow! At those words, from the men that Jesus had chosen in His earthly ministry to be a leader in the Church, the room turned silent. Then they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they gave testimony as to God's work through them among the, including signs and wonders that God had performed.

II.

Then, James, James the Bishop of the Church, rose and said: "Brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for His name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: "After this I will return and I will rebuild the test of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old"

“Therefore, my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled and from blood.”

As St. Luke records it: “It seemed good to the apostles and the elders, together with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas and Silas, leading men among the brothers, with the following letter: “The brothers, both apostles and the elders to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, greetings: Since we have heard that some persons have . . . troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no (such) instructions, it seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from

blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell!”

III.

And that Council's influence comes down unto us, today. Some things in the Council's decision were compromises, and they have passed away for today's Christian. But the spirit of the council remains as a guide to Christians to this day. The guiding principles that come from the judgments of St. James and his council include this: Be patient! Be forgiving! Be yourself forgiven! And expect that the Holy Ghost will be with you and with us, to guide, inform, protect, and bring forgiveness to your individual lives and to the life of your congregation, your larger church connections, and to the work of the Spirit throughout this torn and hurting world.

When you read Acts 15, you see how God puts up with us in our sins and our failures. No sooner was the Council concluded that Paul and Barnabas had a serious conflict and they split on their peace mission, and went in different directions with the good news! They needed forgiveness! So do we! Thanks be to God for His good news, bringing that forgiveness to us!