

7.25.2021 Feast of St. James the Apostle (Matthew 20:20-28)

Jeff Bezos and Richard Branson have been making headlines lately with what you might call their “billionaire space race.” On July 11th, Branson’s Virgin Galactic space plane reached an altitude of 53.5 miles before gliding back to earth for a runway landing, and on July 20th, the 52nd anniversary of Neil Armstrong’s first steps on the moon, Bezos and his crew flew to an altitude of more than 62 miles before parachuting down to a safe landing in the Texas desert. These are incredible human achievements, and yet the amazing heights these men reached in their quest to make space tourism possible for the ultra rich reminded me of an old Puritan prayer called The Valley of Vision. In one part of that prayer we read these words:

“Lord, High and Holy, Meek and Lowly... Let me learn by paradox that the way down is the way up, that to be low is to be high, that the broken heart is the healed heart, that the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit, that the repenting soul is the victorious soul, that to have nothing is to possess all, that to bear the cross is to wear the crown, that to give is to receive, that the valley is the place of vision.”

This morning we commemorate the Feast of St. James the Apostle, and one of the lessons we learn today is “that the way down is the way up, that to be low is to be high.” In our New Testament lesson we read about James and John approaching Jesus with their mother, who made this request, “*Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom. But Jesus answered and said, You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? They said to Him, We are able*” (Matthew 20:21-22).

James and John, or as Jesus named them, the “*sons of thunder*” (Mark 3:17), were living up to that name, they were eager to pay the price of honor and glory, but they didn’t understand that the ways of God’s kingdom are so very different than what we’d expect. They didn’t understand “that the way down is the way up, that to be low is to be high.” James, John, and the other disciples had been arguing amongst themselves about which one of them was the greatest (Luke 22:24), and so “*Jesus called them to Himself and said, You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but*

whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave - just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:25-28).

The ways of God’s kingdom are different than we’d expect, because as Jesus declared, His kingdom is “*not of this world*” (John 18:36). In His kingdom, “to have nothing is to possess all... to bear the cross is to wear the crown... to give is to receive...” In His kingdom the amazing heights of space travel and the incredible human achievements of billionaires are not the place of vision. In His kingdom “the valley is the place of vision.” Nowhere is that seen more clearly than in the valley of our Lord’s sacrificial ministry here on this earth. Holy Scripture declares the unimaginable truth that God, in the Person of Jesus Christ, the Eternal Second Person of the Holy Trinity, “*emptied Himself, taking on the form of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross*” (Philippians 2:5-8).

The *Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve*, to have nothing, to bear the cross, *to give His life a ransom for many*. Our Lord emptied Himself in the valley of vision, and Scripture tells us that “*Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name above all names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*” (Philippians 2:9-11). By His sacrificial life and death, Jesus sets an example for all who, like James and John, desire *to become great among you*, or *to be first among you*. In His example we see that honor and glory and union with God are not found in the fulfillment of our selfish desires, in power, pride, or ambition, but instead, in the denial of those things. When our Lord emptied Himself, He revealed to us through humility and obedience, in suffering and in death, “that the way down is the way up, that to be low is to be high... that the valley is the place of vision.”

Jesus said, “*Whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave...*” When the world thinks of the first and the greatest, billionaires like Jeff Bezos and Richard Branson probably come to mind, but Jesus’ words and His example teach us a different lesson about what it means, from God’s perspective, to be the first and the greatest. Bezos and Branson made

headlines because of their amazing human accomplishments, but let me ask you this question. From God's perspective, who accomplished more, Richard Branson, a billionaire who made history by becoming the first person to launch himself into space on his own Virgin Galactic space plane, or Fr. Joseph Damien, the humble priest who gave his life to minister to the sick, the suffering, the outcast lepers on the island of Molokai. Who accomplished more, Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon whose net worth is \$200 billion, who launched himself into space, or the man whose death we commemorate today, St. James. The first of the Apostles to give his life for the faith, who obediently drank from the cup which he'd told Jesus he was ready to drink.

If you're like me, you're a far cry from Bezos, Branson, or even being able to afford a \$300,000 ticket for a ride on a space plane, but when you consider the example of our Lord and those who faithfully follow Him, you find that from God's perspective any one of us can accomplish more than the rich and famous simply by loving God and reaching out with the love of Christ to the world He gave His life to save. May the grace of God bring us to the Valley of Vision, where we "live in the depths," but see Him "in the heights." Where "the way down is the way up," and "to be low is to be high."