
The Ones Who Asked

**An evensong meditation by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
The Feast of St. Philip & St. James**

There is a particular kind of person who asks the question everyone else is thinking but no one dares to say out loud. Philip was that person.

In the upper room, on the night before Jesus died, the air was thick with dread and confusion. Jesus had been speaking in that luminous, elusive way he sometimes did — *I am the way, and the truth, and the life* — and the disciples were doing what disciples often do: nodding along while understanding very little. And then Philip said it. *Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.*

It is a breathtaking thing to say. Show us God. Just that. We'll be content with that.

Jesus' response carries what sounds like a gentle exasperation: *Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?* But hear it charitably, because I think Jesus is not scolding Philip so much as marveling at him — marveling at how close the answer is, how it has been there all along, walking beside them, eating with them, weeping with them. *Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.*

Philip's question is our question. It has always been our question. Show us. We want to see. And the answer given to Philip is the answer given to us: Look here. Look at this. This is what God looks like.

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We know less about James — James the son of Alphaeus, sometimes called James the Less, perhaps to distinguish him from the more prominent James the son of Zebedee. The epithet has an unfortunate ring to modern ears, but it likely referred to his stature or his age rather than his importance. What we know of him is mostly silence. He appears in the lists of the Twelve. He was there. He stayed.

There is, it turns out, a great deal to be said for staying.

The early church remembered James as a man of deep and costly faithfulness. Tradition holds that he preached throughout Palestine and was martyred for it — thrown from the pinnacle of the Temple, then beaten to death when the fall did not kill him. He died, the old accounts say, still praying for those who were killing him. Whether the precise details are history or legend, they describe a man shaped by what he had witnessed — a man in whom the life of Jesus had taken such root that it bore its natural fruit, even at the end.

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Philip and James. The one who asked the great question. The one who stayed.

Together they give us something like a map of the life of faith.

Philip reminds us that the questions are holy. There is nothing unfaithful about standing in the midst of all you have been given and saying, *I still want to see*. The mystics called it the hunger that holiness creates rather than satisfies — the more you are drawn into the light, the more aware you become of how much light there is

still to enter. Philip's question was not a failure of faith. It was faith reaching for what faith is always reaching for.

But James reminds us that the life of faith is not finally resolved in a moment of vision. It is worked out across the long middle distance — in the ordinary faithfulness of showing up, staying present, remaining in the community even when the community is frightened and confused and getting things wrong. James was there. James stayed. And in the end, the staying shaped him into someone through whom, as Paul puts it this evening, *the light of the knowledge of the glory of God* could shine.

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I want to suggest that what Philip and James together model is not simply a temperament — the asker and the stayer — but a pattern. A pattern the life of faith makes, over and again, in every serious Christian life.

The first movement is discernment. We are always, if we are paying attention, in the business of asking where Christ is present — in Scripture, in the sacraments, in the stranger, in the suffering, in the unexpected beauty of an ordinary afternoon. Philip's question, *show us the Father*, is the question of discernment. It is the posture of someone who believes presence is there to be found, and who will not pretend to have found it when they haven't. The contemplative tradition has a name for this kind of attentiveness: it is watchfulness, *nepsis*, the alert and patient waiting for what is already, always, drawing near.

The second movement is alignment. Once we have glimpsed — even partially, even uncertainly — where Christ is present, we are called to turn toward it. But this turning is not finally something we accomplish. It is something we allow grace to do in us. This is what James did across the long years between resurrection and martyrdom. He did not simply believe in the presence of Christ; he made himself available to be shaped by it, organizing his loyalties and his loves around what he had seen, letting that presence work its slow transformation. Alignment is costly. It asks us to release the arrangements we have made for our own comfort and to be reorganized around a different center. James allowed this. The tradition says he died still allowing it.

The third movement is witness. Not proclamation as performance, but the simple, irreplaceable testimony of a life that has been changed. Philip's earliest word in the Gospel is *come and see* — an invitation, not an argument. He does not try to prove what he has found. He points. He says: something is happening over here, and you should come and look. That is witness at its most essential. It is what happens when the first two movements have done their work — when discernment has become alignment and alignment has become a kind of transparency, so that something of the light becomes visible in the one who has stood in it long enough.

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We are not so different from either of them. We are people who want to see, and who are slowly, imperfectly, learning to remain. And in that wanting and that remaining, something begins to happen — something the world, for all its noise, is still hungry for. The life of faith has always moved this way: first the patient work of discerning where Christ is present, then the willingness to be still long enough for grace to align us with that presence, and finally — not as achievement but as overflow — the witness that comes when we have stood in the light long enough to carry a little of it with us.

That is the feast we are keeping tonight. That is the life we are being invited into.