

Sermon for Holy Communion for SS Simon and Jude, 28th October 2018

Ephesians 2:19-end; John 15:17-end

Today along with most of the churches in the western world we are commemorating two apostles whom we know very little about, St Simon and St Jude.

There were two Judes, two Judases. We're not quite sure who this one was, because in the four Gospels he is described as being various things. In St Matthew and St Mark he is not called Judas but Thaddeus, which might be a surname; it is only in Saint Luke and the Acts of the Apostles that he is called Jude. St Jude was not the same as Judas Iscariot, although his name in Greek is the same, Ιουδας. People historically haven't chosen him to invoke in prayer, because they think he might get mixed up with Judas Iscariot. So he is called the patron saint of lost causes - 'If all else fails, offer a prayer through St Jude'. The little letter of Jude in the New Testament was not written by this Jude, according to many scholars. In St Luke's Gospel Jude is described as the son of James the brother of Jesus. 'Jude the Obscure', which was the title of one of Thomas Hardy's novels, is an apt name for him.

Simon - not Simon Peter - had been a terrorist - a real terrorist. He had been a member of the Zealots, who were a Jewish extremist sect that believed that the Jews were supposed to be a free and independent nation; that God alone would be their king, and that any payment of taxes to the Romans or accepting their rule was a blasphemy against God. They were violent. They attacked both Romans and any Jews who they thought were collaborating with the Romans. Simon had been one of them.

So the Apostles were a motley assortment. Humble fishermen; a tax collector; a terrorist (although of course, depending on your

point of view, one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter); James and John, the 'Sons of Thunder', whatever that means. It certainly doesn't sound meek and mild. And of course, Judas Iscariot; the other Jude. Jesus wasn't choosing people whom we would think of as saintly.

But there isn't an awful lot that we know about Simon the Zealot and Jude - Jude-not-that-Jude. So our Bible readings today, the message from St Paul's letter to the Ephesians, 'You are no longer aliens in a foreign land,' and the message from St John's Gospel, about Christians not belonging to the world, are not about them, but rather they are a reminder of some of the teaching that Jesus - and after him, St Paul - gave to the Apostles and to the early Christians.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians has a great theme of 'reconciliation': St Paul's great mission was to bring the Gospel to the non-Jews, the Gentiles, so that Christianity wasn't just a subdivision of Jewishness. 'You are no longer aliens in a foreign land.' Perhaps it's not so topical for us nowadays.

But in Jesus' own teaching, from St John's Gospel (chapter 15) that we heard this morning, packed into these few lines there are some really deep meanings which still help us to understand the nature of God.

Jesus said, 'Because you do not belong to the world ... For that reason the world hates you.' In Jesus' day and in that Roman world, being a Christian was definitely dangerous, simply because Christians didn't worship the Roman emperor as a god. In the reign of some emperors, for example Diocletian, it meant that large numbers of Christians were fed to the lions.

It's still to some extent true today, in parts of the Middle East and in Northern Nigeria, that Christians are persecuted. But by and

large in our part of Surrey, it's not really controversial to say that you are a Christian. But I do think that perhaps we still should reflect on what it means 'not to belong to the world'. You don't 'breathe the same air', as people sometimes say. Are we sometimes tempted to keep our religious belief out of things, for fear of offending people? But Jesus said here, don't be afraid of being different.

What about the next proposition in this teaching passage, 'Servants are not greater than their master'? The translation is actually wrong. The word isn't 'servant', but 'slave', δούλος in Greek. This word also means what was called a 'bondsmen', somebody who was indentured, bought. In the Roman empire, bondsmen, indentured slaves, could buy their freedom. Their bonds could be remitted, they could be ransomed.

It seems to me that these words surely have echoes of the idea of redemption, that by Jesus' sacrifice he has purchased our remission from the slavery of sin. Jesus has bought us out, redeemed us. We are no longer slaves. Earlier on in chapter 15, indeed Jesus does say, 'I call you slaves no longer'.

'The people who hate you', Jesus said, 'do not know the one who sent me'. Again: '... the one who sent me.' This is a reminder of the way that Christians understand God 'in three persons', as the Holy Trinity, father, son and Holy Spirit. (Jesus comes to the Holy Spirit later on, when he talks about sending what he calls the 'Advocate', the spirit of truth, after he has gone. Here, it's just him and the One who sent him).

Here we can see what caused some of the controversy in the early church, which ended up in the Council of Nicaea in the fourth century, and in our Nicene Creed. If God 'sent' Jesus, the Son, was Jesus also God, or just another creature? And depending on the answer to that question, where did the Holy Spirit come from?

God, or God-and-Jesus? And again, was the Spirit, is the Spirit - remember, 'His Spirit is with us', we say - is the Spirit made by God, or is it God itself?

If you don't think of God as a nice old chap with a beard sitting on top of the clouds - and since the sixties, at least, since Bishop John Robinson's wonderful little book, 'Honest to God' [Robinson, J. (1963), *Honest to God*, London, SCM Press], we mostly don't - how can we understand the Holy Trinity? Try the logical, a priori, back to logical first principles, way that Professor Richard Swinburne, the great Oxford philosopher of religion, has set out in his book 'Was Jesus God?' [Swinburne, R. (2008) *Was Jesus God?* Oxford, OUP, p.28f]. It goes like this.

There is a 'divine person' who is omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly free and eternal. Let us call that person 'God'. Because He is omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly free and eternal, God is perfectly good.

God could exist alone, but being perfectly good means he won't be selfish; He will have to have a object for His love. Perfect love is love of an equal: a perfectly good person will seek to bring about another such person, an equal, with whom to share all that he has. That other person is the Son.

But the Son didn't, in fact, come after the Father. As a matter of logic, because they are perfect, 'At each moment of everlasting time the Father must always cause the Son to exist, and so always keep the Son in being.'

But then, Swinburne says, 'A twosome can be selfish'. 'The love of the Father for the Son must include a wish to cooperate with the Son in further total sharing with an equal; and hence the need for a third member of the Trinity' And that is the Holy Spirit.

For the same logical reasons, the Spirit isn't something 'made' by God. As we say in the Creed, the Spirit 'proceeds from' the Father, or the Father and the Son. (Saying 'proceeds from' is perhaps a philosophical cop-out. We can't say exactly how the Spirit gets here). The Three-in-One are, is, there. The Trinity is in a sense caused by the One, by God. But it is one with God. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Three ways of being God.

One more nugget of theology. Jesus says, at verse 24, about the heathen, the worldly people, 'If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin; but now they have both seen and hated both me and my Father'. It seems that Jesus has a different concept of guilt or criminal responsibility from the one we're familiar with. We say that ignorance is no defence. Something is either lawful or it isn't. You might think that sin worked the same way. Something is either sinful or it isn't, surely, isn't it sinful, irrespective whether you know it or not? But Jesus has this different idea - you'll find it also in St Paul's letter to the Romans [7:7] - that heathens, who know nothing about sin, are not sinful. What makes someone sinful, or capable of being sinful, is being 'fixed with knowledge', as a lawyer would put it. So it looks as though ignorance is a defence, where sin is concerned.

But that is perhaps an indication that to 'sin' is not the same thing as to do bad things, to do evil, even. The point about sin is that it is a separation, a turning of your back on, God. And you can't do that, if you don't know about God in the first place. Of course, if you are sinful, if you have turned your back on God, you may well do bad things. If you are saved by grace, you will show it by your good works. If you aren't, if you are lost, you will show it by the bad things you do. St Paul sets it out in Galatians chapter 5.

What a concentrated lesson for his disciples it was from Jesus!

- What it means that the Father is 'the One who sent me';

- what it means that because of me, the Son, you are no longer servants, or really slaves; and,

- what it means that Jesus will get the Spirit to come to you. (That is the 'Advocate', what the Prayer Book and the Authorised Version of the Bible calls the Comforter, ὁ παρακλητος).

The common thread, the theme of Jesus' teaching here, might perhaps be relationships, relationships between people, and with God. And the currency used in those relationships. Hate - 'the world hates you'; service - Jesus has bought us out, redeemed us, so we are no longer slaves; comfort, the Holy Spirit, the Comforter; and love - love from 'the one who sent me'. And 'the greatest of these is love', as you know. [1 Corinthians 13]

Sometimes it's good to think about these lessons that Jesus taught, never mind who was listening to him. It could even be you, as well as Simon-not-Peter or Jude-not-Judas.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant