

## High Wycombe - 28th October 2018 - Simon & Jude

### Jude 1-4, 17-end

Jude,<sup>[a]</sup> a servant<sup>[b]</sup> of Jesus Christ and brother of James,

To those who are called, who are beloved<sup>[c]</sup> in<sup>[d]</sup> God the Father and kept safe for<sup>[e]</sup> Jesus Christ:

**2** May mercy, peace, and love be yours in abundance.

#### Occasion of the Letter

**3** Beloved, while eagerly preparing to write to you about the salvation we share, I find it necessary to write and appeal to you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. **4** For certain intruders have stolen in among you, people who long ago were designated for this condemnation as ungodly, who pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.<sup>[f]</sup>

**17** But you, beloved, must remember the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; **18** for they said to you, "In the last time there will be scoffers, indulging their own ungodly lusts." **19** It is these worldly people, devoid of the Spirit, who are causing divisions. **20** But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; **21** keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to<sup>[n]</sup> eternal life. **22** And have mercy on some who are wavering; **23** save others by snatching them out of the fire; and have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies.<sup>[o]</sup>

#### Benediction

**24** Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, **25** to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

God of truth,

Thank you for the witness of your people over 2000 years faithfully telling and retelling the story of your gospel of love, truth and redemption. Thank you for this text and the wisdom it contains. Open our hearts and minds to what it may contain for us this evening.

Amen

I'm going to start if I may by reminding you of part of the passage for this evening. If you would like to follow along, it's Jude, a tiny little letter, just 25 verses long, right at the back of the Bible just before Revelation.

*"Beloved, while eagerly preparing to write to you about the salvation we share, I find it necessary to write and appeal to you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. For certain intruders have stolen in among you, people who long ago were designated for this condemnation as ungodly, who pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ"*

It's a tough text, isn't it. It's about calling out heresy, standing up against those who would pervert the gospel.

I would be lying if I suggested I was delighted to have this particular passage to preach on for my very first sermon at All Saints. It's not one of the friendlier passages is it? Nobody ever got this embroidered onto a tea towel or put on a bookmark with a picture of a beautiful sunset behind it.

What this is is a letter about holding onto faith and what we know to be true in the difficult times. The times when there is confusion, when pressures cloud our judgment, and allow negative forces to get a foothold.

This little letter is a call to action, a short and punchy missive designed to cut through the apathy and confusion and say no; remember why you are doing this, remember what you believe, remember who you are. And remember who God is.

Appropriate message for these times we are living in. Tremendous cultural change around us. So many of the certainties of the past seem to be under threat.

Nationally, the way we govern ourselves, our relationship with our neighbours in Europe, the environment, our national health service and welfare state, even some of the ways we understand our own identities are under question.

Individually in our own faiths maybe many of us have undergone change. Perhaps when we first came to faith things felt more sure and certain. That moment as a child or younger adult when all of a sudden it all made sense. I'm sure many of us have mountain top moments where the love of God embracing who we are was palpable and life-reordering in its intensity.

Then later in our life of faith things can seem less black and white, more nuanced, we start to see there are voices on both sides of various arguments. Paralysis can occur, we find ourselves unsure what we think about anything.

This is a letter for those times. When we need a reminder what our faith is, how we sustain it, and how we stop ourselves falling for a less powerful, less true message.

How do we do that? In particular it begs the question of who are the intruders, the false preachers? There's a temptation for some churches and some preachers to use this kind of passage to be divisive, and tribal, accusing anyone with a different understanding of being an evil false prophet.

History is littered with examples of people being scapegoated, dividing churches, causing schisms, even wars in the interests of preserving doctrinal purity.

How do we make sense of this very difficult passage?

Let's go back to the passage and have a think about how Jude's hearers would have heard this message.

The first thing to remember is that they had no written accounts of the Gospel or written down Christian theology of any kind. For them the Gospel was a much simpler word of mouth message, the resurrection still just about in living memory. Imagine how it would have felt to hear the message for the first time:

*Have you heard. The man they call Jesus, the one from Galilee, the one they crucified - he is alive. He is the messiah. Through him we can all be changed and defeat death. Get on board, let's turn away from our selfish ways, there's a whole Kingdom of justice and love and mercy and forgiveness and freedom to get going with. There's no time to lose, for while we waste our lives building our fortune here on earth, there are God's children living in poverty and ignorance and without his love in their lives.*

It is this simple word of mouth message Jude is asking them to protect and guard. He describes it as 'the faith once and for all entrusted to the saints. He asks us to build ourselves up on this most holy faith, this knowledge that we are called, beloved in God the father and kept safe in Jesus Christ.

But Jude also knows that there is a danger in this moment, that even with first hand accounts rather than several thousand hand accounts, that corrupt and corruptible human beings were capable of taking the message and fundamentally distorting it..

Because even for them, the freshness of the moment of the resurrection had passed. The second coming of Christ they were still expecting had not taken place yet. They were struggling to keep on keeping on in a society increasingly hostile to their message, and they didn't know who they were any more. Were they Jewish, were they something different. And there were those who are using this time of uncertainty to introduce ways of being which were counter to the Gospel.

To illustrate this, Jude looks back into the Hebrew scriptures to see evidence of ways in which people have turned their backs on God. He talks about people scoffing at truth, pursuing immorality, going their own way, being 'bombastic in speech' and flattering people to their own advantage.

One of the things I've been reflecting on is that from our position with 2000 years of history since Jude made this plea, we can also look back as well as looking forward to learn from the history of the church, and see how Jude's predictions about the distortion of the Gospel have come true.

We can look back to see where have we conveniently forgotten bits here, left out bits there, over and under emphasized bits of the story to make us right... and others wrong. To make us richer... and others poorer. To make the faith which told us that the first will be last and the last first, into the state religion of imperial power, of the Roman Empire, of the British Empire, of the Republican Party. To make the faith that told us that in Christ there is no Jew or Gentile, no male nor female, no slave nor free into a faith which stratifies society, puts the rich man in his castle and the poor man at his gate, and keeps them there.

Even or perhaps especially today we defile one another with our economics, our wars, the countless lives marred by physical and sexual abuse which we have told ourselves did not matter as much as the reputations of the powerful people who ruined those lives.

Perhaps **those** ungodly lusts, **that** licentiousness and perversion of the grace of God is the sort of thing Jude predicted 2000 years ago would be a denial of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Those scoffers, those worldly people who over centuries have justified slavery, war, economic injustice and exploitation, and who do it claiming to be Jesus people.

But the passage is not all gloom, and the end of the passage also offers us hope. Build yourself up in the faith, Jude says, pray in the holy spirit, and keep yourselves in the love of God. The hope lies in the spirit.

Ours is not a dry faith of the book characterised by a slavish commitment to the ways of the past. Our God is a God who continues to speak through the power of the holy spirit.

And in fact the defining characteristic of those who would seek to misinterpret the Gospel as far as Jude is concerned is that they are 'devoid of the spirit'.

Because God didn't just leave us alone with a corruptible and twistable memory of the life and death and resurrection of God himself. God's spirit is alive in the world, challenging, rebuking, correcting, turning our comfortable gospels of ease upside down, bringing life and love and hope and joy when we have done our best to squeeze the life out of the Gospel.

And we see this at work throughout history. Our faith is a faith which is able to constantly adapt with each fresh move of the spirit.

Consider the way Christianity thrives across Africa, the faithfully held quiet Anglican faith of 19th and 20th century missionaries bursting forth into a truly African church of 631 million people, with African spiritualities and theologies working through African cultural contexts.

Consider how the faith of British, Dutch and French slave traders, a faith tradition which justified the oppression and destruction of millions of lives on an epic scale, somehow through the Holy Spirit working directly in the lives of oppressed peoples, became a voice of liberation, hope and life for millions of slaves. The religion of the white man, of the oppressor, becomes the religion of hope.

And here we are, 80 generations since the resurrection, 3000 miles from Jerusalem, at Evensong, still telling the story of the God man who came to earth and died that we might live, still singing the stories of who Jesus was, building our lives on Him.

Now as then, the spirit is continually at work in the lives of people of faith, directing them back to the Gospel, the good news of freedom in Christ Jesus,, helping us to proclaim the faith afresh to each generation.

To conclude then, this is a passage which speaks to us in the fallow times, the times of doubt and despair, the times when voices inside and outside tell us to turn away, to question the fact that we are beloved, that we are God's. And in those times Jude offers us two things to cling to, two ways to keep ourselves focused on our faith.

The first is to look back, to love and cherish the faith as we inherited it, to reflect on that hour you first believed, the moments in life you felt God near, the thin places where something of God flowed into your life, and you knew you were beloved in God and kept safe in Christ Jesus.

The second thing the passage asks us to do is to focus forward, to ask for the Holy Spirit to work in our lives, to be open to the workings of the Holy Spirit in worship and in prayer and contemplation.

As the hymn we've just sung says *"Come down, O Love divine, seek thou this soul of mine, and visit it with thine own ardor glowing."* Perhaps you pray something like that prayer very intentionally every day, perhaps it is a long time since you asked God to come near to you. Perhaps each of us can make the words of the next hymn our prayer together on this quiet evening that we would know God abiding with us this week, reminding us afresh of the good news of the Gospel, guiding our hearts and minds into living out the love, truth and justice of the Gospel in our homes, families and communities.

Amen.