

Sunday 28th October 2018
SS Simon and Jude (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Isaiah 28.14-16

NT: Ephesians 2.19-end

G: John 15.17-27

There are no good stories about St Simon or St Jude, and in fact the best that can be said about St Jude was that he became the patron saint of lost causes because people have always been a bit worried that they might get the address wrong on their prayer envelope and end up sending entreaties to Judas Iscariot instead. So, when they became really desperate, St Jude was the saint at the bottom of their list, when it really was a lost cause. In fact, St Jude has suffered an even greater indignity: we have noticed in Italy in the last few years that, after the Catholic Church raised Padre Pio to sainthood in 2002, it is common for votive collecting boxes with a brass plaque for St Jude to have a handwritten notice taped over the top saying "San Pio". This 1960s icon of sanctity is obviously considered a better money-spinner.

Both, of course, were martyred in the first century, and our readings today remind us of the persecution of followers of Jesus across the centuries. We heard from Isaiah a condemnation of those who ruled Jerusalem in the prophet's day: "We have made a covenant with death," are the words he puts into their lips. "For we have made lies our refuge, and in falsehood we have taken shelter." And then in our Gospel reading we hear Jesus talking to the disciples about some of the hatred and persecution they will face: "If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you." This is how the early Christians must have felt: there is an 'us against them' tone to this. This is the refuge and comfort of the persecuted, that they identify with each other against their oppressors. Whether it is a religious group, or resistance fighters in the war, this is the language of the

oppressed.

Is this, though, the language with which we identify as Christians in 21st century Britain? It is a far cry from the Church's usual desperate attempts to be relevant and connected. The Church is used to maintaining that tension between cultural assimilation, and counter-cultural obstinacy. We rejoice in doing things in Church which are not now usual elsewhere, from standing and singing together, through to sitting down and listening to someone speak for ten minutes without interruption. But there is a common fallacy that we can lure people in by being contemporary, by removing what are perceived as barriers and making attempts to build bridges with the world around us. Of course this is not a bad thing at all – we behave not as a Church but as a sect if we set ourselves apart from others – but it is a bad thing if we think that religion becomes more attractive if it looks and feels like any other aspect of life, but just relocated into a heritage building. Holding that tension between our calling as a Church to witness to Jesus Christ as someone who was often hated by the world, and making our expression of this witness be something attractive and helpful, is a challenge indeed.

The 'us against them' tone of the Gospel reading today is culturally part of our inheritance as a Church, and it is something which we continue to endorse in our expression of belief and worship. But we must introduce a *caveat*: allowing ourselves to be different from the world around us does not give us permission to hate the world around us. The Gospel reading today is clear in its description of the hatred and persecution which Jesus and his followers faced – hatred and persecution which led to the martyrdom of St Simon and St Jude – but it does *not* say that Jesus and his followers took a negative view of the world they saw. By extension, being different from the world around us does not give us permission, in

the eyes of the world, to disapprove of the world. One of my favourite phrases is that if you find that God hates the same people that you hate, then you know that you have made him in your own image. This, sadly, is the reputation which Christians in the 21st Century sometimes have. The Church turns itself from the persecuted Church of St Simon and St Jude into the persecutors, quick to condemn, and lining up a series of targets chosen from economics to sexuality.

The danger then is that we go to the other extreme: if we accommodate everything, then we lose our voice, having nothing distinctive to say. Jesus claims his voice in today's Gospel. He says, "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin." Actually, we do have something to say to the world. We do have something to say about injustice and hatred, about oppression and conflict. We have rather a lot to say to the world, just as the early martyrs did by their discipleship of Jesus.

Having identified the tension, how do we live with it? We live by modelling what we have to say: this is the strongest preaching. The Church should not be persecuting others, but in our discipleship as individuals and as a Church community we should be modelling how we think we are called to be. That is, not people who condemn, but people who can be counter-cultural by illustrating love. We can speak against things, but never more so than when we see hatred shown by our own community.

The early martyrs are often shown as men and women who gave their lives in a flourish of passivity. But no martyr is passive, because their death is the most aggressive proclamation of a cause. Across the ages, St Simon and St Jude have witnessed to the love of Jesus. In images, Simon is often shown with a saw, traditionally given as the instrument of his death;

Jude is depicted carrying the image of Jesus in his hand or close to his chest, showing the cause in which he died. Both are buried in the same tomb in St Peter's Basilica in Rome.

Thankfully, we are unlikely to be called to a martyr's death, but we are called to model our discipleship just as much as they were called to do so. Today's readings remind us of how religious belief can be viewed, but that words such as 'hatred' and 'persecution' are not ours, for we must model love. Anyone who persecutes another in the name of Christ is no follower of Christ. Instead, let us continue to be counter-cultural: let us sing hymns, and listen to sermons; let us share holy food, and let us pray. And let us extend the support and friendship which we give each other in our Church community outside the building to become support and friendship to the world. That is counter-cultural behaviour which will always make hymn-singing seem relatively low-grade. At the start of our Gospel reading today, Jesus said, "I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another." That's a pretty good way to start challenging the world around us.

Fr Crispin Pailing