

Sermon for Ss Simon and Jude

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When the Dean invited me to speak at King's on the feast of saints Simon and Jude, I leapt at the chance. I reasoned that even a bear of little brain like me could surely find something of value to say on a saint's day; indeed, with two saints on offer, surely, I doubled my chances of finding some scrap of intelligence to share with you all. Oh, how I've regretted my rashness ever since.

Saints Simon and Jude present a problem, you see. Frankly, we know nothing about them, and the Church has assigned few myths and traditions to them. Simon is identified as the Zealot mentioned in the gospels. This has led some to connect him with the Zealot movement – committed to the overthrow of the Roman regime by assassination and direct action – mentioned by the historian Josephus, though the status of this 'movement' has also been the subject of controversy.

Jude. Well, one has to feel sorry for him. We arguably know even less about him. His name itself is rarely stable, moving from Judas to Jude to Thaddeus to Lebbaeus. The shift to Jude from Judas is understandable: early traditions wanted to ensure he was not overly associated with the betrayer, Judas Iscariot. You may know that Jude has become known as the patron saint of lost causes, quite possibly because his name is so similar to Iscariot's. The logic runs thus, I think: when one invokes any apostle's name for help, choose anyone before one gets to Jude, in case one confuses him with Judas. Some credit the letter of Jude to him and some don't. As for them being commemorated on the same day, this perhaps reflects a story that says they were martyred together on a mission to Persia.

What a pair then. A potentially reformed terrorist and a person who's so tainted by association with Christ's betrayer that he's become the saint of last resort. A nobody who might have written a book which, in today's reading, froths at the mouth about licentiousness. A two-bit dynamic duo who head off to Persia only to be killed, perhaps because they so wound-up their audience with either their fanaticism and/or insignificance. As double acts and heroes they're not exactly up there in the pantheon with Batman and Robin or Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson or, arguably, even the Chuckle Brothers.

Which may be part of the point. Jesus says, 'These things I command you, that ye love one another.' Christ's priority is relationship. He invites those who follow him to do as he does; to love, not in a sentimental manner, but in such a way that one places oneself in the hands of others, who might thereby hurt or use or violate you. Christ is prepared to be handed over into the hands of the other, so he invites those who follow him to do likewise. If they would be his friends, they must be prepared to enter a place of intimacy and, therefore, risk and precariousness; for what are we, if not bodies that are so easily marred and destroyed. For as we know, violence lies in all bodies, and in our intimacies we can be vile, exploitative and destructive. Our bodies are histories of trauma, desire and delight.

Jesus delivers the words we've heard this morning as part of his Farewell Discourse. He directs them towards his intimate followers, among whom one presumes would have included Jude and Simon. Perhaps they looked around and thought, 'Love? Love him? Love her?' Perhaps they looked around at those with whom they were set and saw each other and thought, 'I'm not sure about him.' Perhaps they thought, 'how am I to place my life, my body, my fragile existence into the hands of them?'

Love one another. If we are to count ourselves among those who would follow Jesus Christ do we look around and find we are surrounded by clowns, and pillocks and the priggish and bewildering? The hateful? We might be the kind of believer who imagines we possess the great idea, the defining story of creation, yet become disappointed that it is carried in sullied hands and communicated with feeble tongues. We hear Christ say, 'Love one another', just as clearly as Jude and Simon ever did, and yet we would prefer not to be in each other's hands; we should prefer a place without risk. We wish to insulate ourselves from violence.

Those of you who are social media or news junkies may be aware of how brutal and vile that world can be. For LGBTI people generally and for trans people like me, specifically, there is such an absence of love in those spaces that the temptation is to ever more closely insulate. And let's be clear, there is only so much toxicity the human body can stand. I find it most brutal when vile cruelties and erasures are issued from the mouths of those who, for good or ill, I count as family – fellow Christians, usually of a most conservative ilk. Yes, we may be distantly related – some sort of cousin, many times removed – but we remain family.

And Christ says, 'Love one another.' And I am so tempted to hurl my own grenades from my trench into theirs. Or take their unexploded ordinance and throw it back in their direction. I have lain awake dreaming of what my words might do to them. They have hurt me and my friends so much. I want to make war without end, on those with whom I am called to be. And, rightly, sometimes the only wise thing to do is walk away. Yet, still the ordinance of words falls, and there are others in the front line.

Christ also says in today's gospel, 'Remember the word that I said unto you, 'The servant is not greater than his lord.' If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you'. The language of persecution is so readily reached for by all sides. The language of victimhood is potent and I understand why all wish to reach for it.

Yet, for me, not least of Christ's claims upon those who would count themselves as his friends is a preparedness to find some way, however precarious, however feebly, of holding those who despise us – whoever 'us' may be! – in the wounds of the Body of which we're part. So that love is not mere toleration, but active recognition of Christ. That's where I want to be rather than furiously striking back at those who despise my queerness. That's the place I want to commend to each of you. It's where – forgive my fantasy – I should like to picture Simon and Jude in the moment of their martyrdom, their apparent failure in Persia. As the blow falls that crushes their bodies, a vision of God, of the reconciliation to which we are all ultimately called.