

Can the saints help us in the Anthropocene era?

Sermon on Feast of SS Simon and Jude: Sunday 28th October 2018 at All Saints Church Wokingham by Canon David Hodgson

Here is a fiendishly tricky possible quiz night question – what links the little-known Lincolnshire town of Caistor (on the A46 about half-way between Lincoln and Grimsby) with the large modern city of Urfa in the south-east Anatolia area of Turkey? Well, both are said to be the place where one of the twelve disciples of Jesus, Simon known as the Zealot, was martyred. Legend also has it that he might have been killed in Beirut in Lebanon, or it might have been in Armenia that Simon was either crucified, or sawn in half for his faith. Simon the Zealot, as distinct from Simon Peter, is one of the twelve apostles chosen by Jesus and listed in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke and also in the Acts of the Apostles. But virtually nothing else is said about him in the New Testament. Luke gives him this epithet “zealous” or “Zealot” - was this a reference to his religious fervour as a devout Jew, or was he a member of a Jewish freedom movement known as the Zealots, who organised against the Roman occupation? We don't know really. Simon the Zealot is one of the least known of the apostles. Consequently, Christian imagination over the centuries has abounded, and there are many different conflicting legends about him.

We remember this Saint Simon on 28th October together with Saint Jude; who also is listed as one of the twelve disciples. There are confusions around Jude too – in the biblical texts his name is actually written Judas, but not the same one as Judas Iscariot, who is listed in all the gospels with his second name and the phrase “the one who betrayed him” or “the traitor”. But in the list of disciples in Matthew and Mark's gospels Jude doesn't appear, the name appears only in the lists in Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. In Matthew and Mark's lists another name appears, Thaddeus, which by deduction, if the lists are compatible with Luke's, could be a second name for Jude, again to avoid confusion with Judas Iscariot. Or maybe not!

There is also a brother of Jesus called Judas in a list of Jesus' family members in Mark's gospel; and there is a short letter written by a Jude in the New Testament, you find it after the third letter of John and before The Book of Revelation. Are these all the same Jude? Roman Catholics say yes generally; on the whole Protestants tend to say no: Jude and Thaddeus are the same person, ie St Jude, one of the twelve disciples whom we remember today; but Jude the brother of Jesus and Jude the author of the letter in the New Testament may be the same person but a different Jude from today's St Jude.

As Anglicans we remember Simon and Jude because after the Protestant Reformation it was decided in England that, whilst the majority of the saints' days should be downgraded into smaller festivals or commemorations only, all of the disciples of Jesus should be among those saints whose days were to be kept as major festivals of the Church. Even though we knew little about some of them.

So whilst it's true we cannot speak with any certainty about what in particular Simon did or what Jude did, there are lots of legends of course; but what we do know about Simon and Jude is that they were disciples of Jesus who remained with him, who were witnesses to the resurrection of Christ, who received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and who were sent out as apostles to proclaim the good news. And that is enough cause for celebration; they were not the leading apostles, not the pillars of the church, but they were part of that first team who are, as the Letter to the Ephesians says, “the foundation of the apostles and prophets” on which the whole community of Christ is built.

From that we also I think may extrapolate, as Christian imagination down the years has done, that Simon and Jude were among those who suffered in the first century world for their faith – as we know there was difficulty for and opposition to Christians, official and unofficial, during their lifetimes; and so it is highly likely that they were martyred for their faith. Tradition though mixed and confused as to the details – Caistor or Urfa? - does testify to this. And so the gospel reading

from Saint John chosen for this feast of St Simon and St Jude is the prediction by Jesus that his disciples would be persecuted.

The other bible reading set for today consists of a few verses from the Letter to the Ephesians, from which comes that quotation about the foundation of the apostles and prophets which we are built upon. Here is a picture of the temple as the dwelling-place of God, not however as a building but as a people, a community. The vision of Ephesians is of "one new humanity"; this is how the good news of the coming of Christ and the Spirit into the world is framed in this letter, which is that through Christ all boundaries and barriers as between different groups have been removed, all divisions between people have been reconciled because all now, through what Christ has done, have access in one Spirit to the one Father. This is the message which drove the apostles to every corner of the known world – whether Simon's or Jude's journey of faith ended in Lincolnshire or in Armenia what these traditions tell us is that they gave their lives to this vision, they went out, they were sent out as apostles to bring this vision, this good news of what faith can do, to the whole world. They were not setting out to sell people the Christian religion as such, or to get them to sign up for a new organisation; they were bringing them news that on the basis of what they had seen and experienced in Jesus Christ, there was hope of a new way of being for the world, one new humanity.

Who much cares now or even knows any single thing about the lives and witness of Saint Simon and Saint Jude – taking the population as whole I mean. In some traditional communities – such as the mountain villages of Greece for example – or the rural heartlands of Central Europe – the saints remain for many real companions in life and their days are celebrated with devotion, there is a genuine cycle of feasting and abstinence maintained. They are embedded in the rhythms of cultural as well as spiritual life. In societies of the world like ours, especially those dominated both by the Protestant legacy and advanced capitalism in tandem, we have retired our saints, not into active retirement either; not because they have forgotten who we are, but because we, our society in general I mean, have forgotten both who they are and what they could enable us to become.

Looking around the world today it does not feel like we are advancing in any sense to one new humanity. There appears to be a rising fear of others, a strengthening of borders, a retreat back into enclaves of difference and division; treaties of international union and co-operation are being torn up or reneged on. And yet these tendencies are all in themselves consequences of failures of a hope and faith among many groups and peoples of the world and within every country that there can ever be one new humanity. That hope is lost when there is no evidence of a sustained progress towards the greater inclusion and the equitable distribution of goods, recognition and respect for all people. Yet it does not mean the yearning for that progress is lost, or that the desire to see a new humanity is no longer the deepest and most true desire.

Looking around the world the hopeful message of the Christian gospel also feels like it is being ignored by the most powerful societies and groups, allegedly for having been tried and failed. But Christian faith continues to grow and change lives in communities of people who know that life and peace cannot be taken for granted.

But even if there are many ways in which it does not look as if we are together moving toward one new humanity, nonetheless there is also a force of things as they are to be reckoned with; as things as they are impinge upon us more and more, a response is called for. I am thinking here of the phenomenon which has been called the epoch of the Anthropocene. This is a description of where we are now in the history of the earth, in which human activity is the dominant influence in all the major systems of the earth. What this means for how we see ourselves as part of a single global scale human community is still being worked out and by some not worked out; but more and more we will need at all scales of our life together as human beings, to respond to this reality of the ways things are, and choices will become more pressing as to what moral and spiritual resources we should draw upon, to help us become more unified and more able to co-operate in

making sure that life on the planet will be not only liveable but enjoyable and meaningful for everyone.

We might do well to bring some of the Christian saints back out of retirement. For what inspires many people today especially young people are not abstract truths or principles for living in themselves, as much as stories from the subjective perspective of lives lived authentically with hope and love whilst navigating through the realities of life with all its pains and struggles.

So, it is to the recognised saints we could do well to look, for they are both human like us and yet also have opened themselves to the love and grace of God more deeply and consistently than most of us and so have become shining lights for us.

Jude is said to be the patron saint of the impossible, of hopeless situations. It's interesting that he has become popular in parts of the world where hope for the future has been diminished. Many people are struggling to find hope today. Perhaps Jude should be among the first of the ancient saints to be brought out of retirement in the modern age?

Let me end with a quotation from the 4th century by the great Saint Augustine of Hippo. It describes how the saints of old give us hope and strength even when we know that our lives can never be as pure and as graceful as theirs in practice, but nonetheless we are all together as one:

“Let us celebrate their feasts with the utmost devotion.. It is no small part of imitation to rejoice together in the virtues of those who are better than we are. They are great, we are little, but the Lord has blessed the little with the great. They have gone ahead of us, they tower over us like giants. If we are not capable of following them in action, let us follow them in affection; if not in glory, then certainly in joy and gladness; if not in merit, then in desire; if not in suffering, then in fellow feeling; if not in excellence, then in our close relationship with them.” /END

David Hodgson, October 2018