

SERMON - THE FEAST OF ST. SIMON AND ST. JUDE – 28 OCTOBER 2018

St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

Father Mark Menees, D.D.

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Feast of St. Simon and St. Jude

Eph. 2: 19ff

John 15: 17ff

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

The Church Calendar, the cycle of days we move through annually, sets the message of our faith clearly in front of us so that we can over and over participate with men and women from all ages in the life of Jesus gives us. From birth to ministry, from teachings and parables, from crucifixion to resurrection we become a part of a great story. We enter into special days and seasons, events and encounters that alter our lives because these are not just about the past, but about our present relationship and growing trust in God. As any member of the Altar Guild will tell you, it is necessary to consult that calendar to get the proper, lessons, colors, and plumage correct! And it only takes one look to realize it is literally riddled with saints' days like today. In fact some days have a whole flock of these characters listed.

A select group of these people are well known and their influence is immediately recognized across the span of history. Peter and Paul, Mary and Martha, and John the Beloved Disciple we know, both in terms of familiarity and in the connection we make with their witness. Others are local figures impacting smaller regions. Some are lost to history and are known to God alone, but their faith has made a difference in the lives of others. And there are those shadowy figures like Simon and Jude about whom we know very little; mentioned in scripture but in no great detail. (explain the names) We might well ask 'why' this is so; because they all share one lasting quality; they walk before and with us, and their stories tell us who Christ really was for them and can be for us. Their doubts, struggles, and hopes are sign posts and mile markers on the journey of faith and are no different from our own. They all point us to life in Christ and among His people. There is no such thing as a 'solitary' Christian.

The Gospel today is a rough and tumble example of what Ephesians says in a more poetic and pleasant way. It is taken from Jesus' 'Farewell Discourse'. Times are tough, death and persecution are imminent, and there is no comfortable building or welcoming society ready to receive the disciples. They are left hanging on their belief that in this man God is acting decisively for the world; a world which will not throw them a party, and is pretty sure it does not want what they have to offer. Jesus does not sugar coat that reality. It is enough to make them frightened and a little paranoid. But just as He is honest about the world's reaction, He also gives them an anchor to hold onto—"love one another", because love is the ONLY thing that overcomes sin and hatred. It alone will form a new creation, a new community, a new world—the Kingdom. Anything less will only lead back to a brokenness already known too well.

Ken Follett in his novel, Fall of Giants, tells the story of a young Welshman, Billy Williams, at the brink of WW I. Billy, like so many of the poor in Wales grows up to work in the coal mines in horrible and dangerous conditions while the owners glean the profits and benefits. It is a world with little in the way of comfort, leisure, or ease. Cruelty is a daily experience and home life is dark with the shadow of life in a mining community. Reading this part of the novel is a bit like watching an Ibsen play in black and white-depressing. Da, Billy's father is a hard and rigid man relatively unmarked by compassion, but well-marked by the world in which he lives. As war breaks out Billy joins a company known as the Welsh Rifles, and is assigned to the front at Somme in France. The mortality rate for the British is sky high. Preparing to leave Billy is uncertain of how to say his goodbyes, which may well be final ones. His mother is distraught as is his sister. When he comes to his father he holds out a hand to shake, but to his surprise his father embraces him, and in a moment he is confronted with love he had not been sure existed. Through the horror of battle he carries that moment with him, and it eventually becomes his salvation in allowing him to move beyond hatred to find love in his own life. His situation is like Simon and Jude in the "Farewell Discourse" of today's Gospel. He is given the one thing that lasts.

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I wonder if the Church and those of us who have cast our lots with Jesus are really in any different a context? Our Lord tells us the world will react very poorly and in a hostile and circumspect manner toward those who hold to His way of life and seek to convey it in word and deed. Understand that when Jesus speaks of “the world” in this text He is not speaking about that territory out there and outside these walls. He is not demonizing or condemning day in and day out life or human attempts to get by in society. We live in a nation where we celebrate individual achievement and where we champion self-determination and direction. But when that crosses over the line; when isolated self-desire allows us to demonize others, or neglect our neighbor, something is terribly amiss. (There is much debate in this country over abortion, and it stirs powerful emotions. Few of us wish to so direct the lives of others as to take away their decisions as responsible adults. But when abortion becomes merely a secondary form of birth control for an individual's convenience rather than a last resort in the face of numerous bad options, the Church is required to ask penetrating questions about what really directs us.) Jesus is talking about the propensity of human beings to serve themselves in all things and to manipulate people and situations to their own advantage without regard to the cost to others. Sometimes that appears innocuous, and at others it shows the dark underbelly of human sin. (Pittsburg) Our Lord is confronting those who choose lesser ways and lower values than sacrificial love, and who hide behind slogans and power and are willing to discard any who get in their way. He is challenging the polarization of life in a society where some are written off and discarded simply because they have no power. As someone once commented to me, “The meek will inherit the earth, when those bold and strong among us are through with it”! It is not possible to reconcile that point of view with “love one another”. St. Simon and St. Jude learned that lesson all too well when they were martyred in Persia. Yet their witness to Christ lives on when those who rejected them and their message have faded into time.

God's people, the Church, are built around a different cornerstone. Our witness to the love of Christ is Christ's own message; it is Him speaking through our being a different kind of community.

It is striking to me; ironic actually, that we commemorate 2 men who have “faded into history”. Fr. Steve Grunow wrote, “That the Gospels pay so little attention about the twelve Apostles might strike us as odd. The details of their lives are lost to the past. In heaven we will know them better, but now, we know of them mostly through the legacy of their faith which is living in us. The obscurity of most of the twelve Apostles is also a significant lesson for us. To be a disciple is not to be an exercise in self-promotion. Holiness happens to us when we willingly disappear into the mission of the Church. Our work, our mission, is not about us, what we want, or what we prefer, but about giving our lives over to Christ and letting him do with us what he wills.

The Apostles proved themselves faithful by their willingness to live for Christ and disappear into the mission of the Church. We should imitate their example.”

Amen+