

St Edward, Burgess Hill (25.10.20)
Last Sunday after Trinity

Leviticus 19.1–2, 15–18
1 Thessalonians 2.1–8
Matthew 22.34–end

A TIME OF REMEMBRANCE

Today the long Trinity season comes to an end and we turn towards Advent. This short pre-Advent season in the late autumn is time of remembrance. In a few days time we celebrate the Feast of Saint Simon & Saint Jude, two of the apostles chosen by Jesus, but of whom nothing is known. November opens with the festivals of All Saints and All followed by All Souls, and ten days later Remembrance Day. This is a time of remembrance and celebration of those who have gone before us in the community of faith. Like Simon and Jude, we know little or nothing about most of them, but that's not important; what is important is that in their lives they bore witness to Jesus, the Son of God.

Ten years ago Helen and I visited Binham Priory in north Norfolk – it's about three miles from the coast. It was a Benedictine community, a Priory of St Albans Abbey, founded in the eleventh century by a nephew of William the Conqueror. Most of the monastery is in ruins, but the nave of the church is intact, and is still used as a parish church. Walking in these places, where, as T S Eliot put it, prayer has been valid, always moves me. The spirit of those who lived and worshipped there lives on; it's like stepping into the past; and I experience part of what has made me who I am. There is that sense of the oneness with the saints and all those who we remember at this time.

Walking among the ruins at Binham you can still make out clearly the plan of the monastery. The four massive pillars that supported the central tower still soar above you, and you can walk though the choir up the steps into the sanctuary where the High Altar stood. As I stood there I imagined the monks at prayer, and one of the brothers celebrating the Eucharist much as we do today. Their prayers are still in the stones. It was Benedictine communities like Binham that centuries earlier had kept alive the faith and learning of European civilisation during the Dark Ages. Communities like Binham helped to form this country, just as the prayers of the monks formed the Abbeys and themselves. Part of me is rooted there.

Binham was founded in 1091, so it take us back about half the time since St Paul wrote to the Christians of Thessalonica. We know little of them; but we do know, from what St Paul writes, of their faithfulness under persecution which had made them very dear to him, as we heard in today's second reading. I wonder if they knew of Simon and Jude whose feast day falls later this week, and who also, it is believed, suffered for their faith.

Simon the Zealot, so called because he was a member of the Zealot Party, worked for independence from the Romans. Maybe he looked to Jesus as a political saviour; if so, he would have had to change his mind. Jude is described as the brother of James – not James the apostle, but James the brother of Jesus, the author of the Letter of James. So, if Jude was the brother of James, he would also have been the brother of Jesus. Legend says that after the resurrection Simon and Jude and went to Persia where they were martyred. When we visited Armenia in 2018, we discovered that there he is known as Thaddaeus, the name that St Matthew gives

him, and together with Bartholomew he is believed to have been the first evangelist of Armenia. It is thought unlikely that Jude actually wrote the Letter of Jude, and nothing more is known of them apart from a question that Jude addressed to Jesus at the Last Supper.

According to John, Jude thought Jesus had said that he would disclose himself only to the disciples. This puzzled him, so he asked Jesus about it: 'Lord, how has it come about that you mean to disclose yourself to us and not to the world?' Jesus replied that that is not what he meant. He is not going to disclose himself only to the select few; he will disclose himself to anyone who loves him: 'Anyone who loves me will heed what I say; then my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him...' (*John 14.22-23*)

This was the invitation that Jesus held out to all whom he encountered, and which those who put their faith in him – Simon & Jude, Paul, the Christians at Thessalonica, the monks of Binham, the faithful of this church – have passed on to the people of every age since. It is an invitation that, most have declined. Many that Jesus himself encountered were hostile, challenging him with hostile questions, like the one on the poll tax that we heard last week. Jesus may have silenced his opponents, as we heard in today's gospel, but he did not win over their hearts.

Today we feel the same hostility. We have moved beyond the time of indifference towards Christianity to hostility. One example are the attacks on Christians by Islamists in Pakistan and elsewhere, and now on Armenia by Azerbaijan. Another example is the way governments sit light the Christian principles of social justice (rooted in the OT, as in today's first reading), which have led to the

huge and growing gap between rich and poor. St John records that as Jesus responded to Jude's question, he warned his disciples that they were engaged in a battle for souls. 'If they hated me,' he said, 'they will hate you.' And we are now caught up in that battle. We may not have the words to combat those who deny God, but the more eloquent testimony is the way we live our lives, just as it was for the Christians of Thessalonica and monks of Binham in their day.

The real question is whether we can deal with the problems that face us - from social injustice to sexual harassment and child abuse - in our own strength? We may not know much about Simon and Jude, but we can be pretty sure of their answer: 'No!' they would reply. 'It is self-giving, not self-satisfaction that is the source of moral strength. To be truly strong we need to love the Lord, and to let him make his dwelling in us.'

That, I believe, is what we are called to do. Like those whom we remember at this time, we shall pass away; nothing much may be remembered about us, but what we have done, will not be lost. God calls us to be faithful, to play our part, to witness to our faith in the way we live our lives, and he will use our offering to his glory. Our faith may be battered, but like the nave at Binham, its heart is sound. God will not let us go. He has given us all we need, and it is there in Jesus' answer to Jude's question: 'Anyone who loves me will heed what I say; then my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him...' Christ is our strength and our foundation. To him be the glory, now and for ever. Amen.