

Sermon Feast of Saints Simon and Jude 2018

The calling of the twelve, such as we have just heard proclaimed in the gospel today, is a feature of all the Gospels. But Luke alone, in the version we have heard today, says that these twelve Jesus named ‘apostles’. The term is actually quite rare in the gospels, though in the Acts of the Apostles and the remainder New Testament it figures quite prominently. Now, while *we* often use the terms ‘disciple’ and ‘apostle’ interchangeably, they do in fact have quite distinct meanings. In the gospels, *all* those who follow Jesus are disciples. That in fact is what ‘disciple’ means: to follow. But from this much larger body (and at different places in different gospels the suggestion is that this could be quite a large group, numbering at times dozens maybe even hundred) is called the twelve: the apostles. And rather than just ‘following’ these twelve are those whose specific office and mission is to be ‘sent.’

Jesus’ choice of twelve leaders was symbolic and suggestive, even provocative. And clearly he sensed the gravity of the moment. His calling of the twelve – as we heard described for us in the gospel today – comes after a night of prayer. Now, some of those names which feature in these lists of the twelve we know quite well. A figure like Peter emerges as quite a rounded figure in the Gospels. James, John, Matthew, Thomas, Judas, even, we get glimpses (and really only ever glimpses) of their personality and their personal stories. But mostly, the other names of the twelve remain somewhat obscure, mysterious even. And if wonder at the silence in the NT record we need to remember it is not the purpose of the NT writers to tell *their* story. The intent of the Gospels is to tell the story of Jesus. Everything else is incidental.

The two apostles whom we remember and celebrate today – Simon and Jude - are I’m afraid, those included in the obscure and shadowy part of the list. Apart from their names in the Gospels, there is very little we know definitely about these two Apostles. Simon (a common enough name in the first century) is called the Zealot by the evangelists (perhaps to distinguish him from Simon Peter). ‘Zealot’ may indicate his membership of a strict, politically-motivated Jewish sect. There was a party called the Zealots famous in the war of the Jews against their Roman occupiers that came to a head with the destruction of the Temple in 70AD. But there is no direct evidence the group existed in Jesus’ lifetime. This is not to say it didn’t exist. But ‘zealot’ might simply refer to a personal character trait: that he was a rather feisty, hot-headed, enthusiastic fellow, as young men - filled with the fervour of religion - often are.

After Pentecost, Simon, like several other Apostles, is not heard of again in the New Testament. However, there is an abundance of legends about his subsequent life and final martyrdom. One eastern source gives Edessa in Mesopotamia as the place where he died. But a western tradition indicates that he first preached in Egypt. He then joined his fellow Apostle Jude, who was in Mesopotamia, and they both went east to Persia. It was there that they were martyred together. In one story their throats were cut and in another Simon was sawn in two.

Jude, called “Judas, son of James”, is mentioned by Luke in his gospel and in the Acts and also in John. He is commonly identified with Thaddaeus, who appears in the list of Apostles in Matthew and Mark, where there is no mention of Jude. He is also believed to be the author of the little Letter in the New Testament bearing his name (just 25 verses long, immediately before the Book of Revelation). As with Simon, nothing certain is known of his life after Pentecost but again there are many legends. As mentioned, a Western tradition says that he joined up with Simon to preach the Gospel in Persia. In more modern times, Jude has acquired the reputation as the ‘patron of hopeless cases’. The origin of this devotion is said to be that no one would pray to him because his name was so like that of the traitor Judas Iscariot. Only people who had tried every other option would in desperation turn to him!

Who knows what truth may lay behind the legends. I now tend to think that there is often more truth in them than we give them credit. There are other ways of remembering the great and glorious beyond the written record. The residents of Beechworth today will very matter-of-factly point you to the sites associated with Ned Kelly. In Salzburg, Mozart remains a powerful presence. For the holy ones, their footprints are hard to extinguish. They leave echoes and traces that seem to linger long. But in the end, the key to understanding their lives is to understand them in the terms of exactly what the Gospels do tell us: namely *that they were apostles*.

‘Apostle’ simply means those who are sent. And the word has a dynamic quality. It denotes a sending, a mission, a movement outward. It meant the apostles’ lives came to be marked by activity, impelling them far beyond the confines of the backblocks of Judea. But the word is borrowed from secular usage. As so often, the church picked up a word already in circulation, and adopted it to its own purposes. And the idea behind the word ‘apostle’ is that of a kind of emissary, an ambassador, someone who represents a greater power.

So, more than just a messenger, an *apostolos* is a representative. For the community of faith, then, the Apostles, were those sent to represent their master, Jesus. As Jesus transferred his own authority and power to the apostles, he compared this to the commission he had received from the Father: '*As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*' The apostles would be his representatives. Each would be *as Jesus himself*. Each would be empowered to do the things that Jesus himself had done: heal the sick, cast out demons, raise the dead, and even forgive sins. Such is the dignity and power Jesus himself invests in his representatives. The implication being that to meet and encounter the apostles was to meet and encounter Jesus himself. They continue his mission and ministry, as if he were truly present.

In the letter to the Ephesians we have also heard today, Paul reminds us that in the new household of God Christ is the cornerstone. But the apostles are identified as the foundation. Elsewhere in the New Testament, the pillars. As part of their solemn vocation, the apostles hold the church together. In the creed, when we confess faith *one, holy, catholic and apostolic church* we mean that no preaching, teaching or tradition is legitimate unless it can be traced back to the apostles. Because in their distinct mission to represent Christ, what is apostolic, actually means is from Christ!

Now, the office of 'apostle' was a phenomenon of the first generation of Christians. Never in the centuries which follow do we find men claiming the title apostle. Although the church's bishops have always traced their authority to that of the apostle, they don't use that title themselves. Their authority is apostolic, but they are not apostles. But the office and ministry remain normative for those who hold the office of bishop today: called to represent Jesus Christ himself. To understand their role in that way ought to put everything else in perspective. The one essential role of the bishop: to hold fast to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic faith as received from the apostles. Change is always part of the life of the church. To live is to change. But not innovation. Not rupture. And not departure from the witness of the apostles. For their witness is that of Christ himself.

Simon and Jude, in their obscurity and mystery, nonetheless have been afforded the greatest dignity: to be foundation and pillars in the Temple of the Lord. If we wish to inhabit a dwelling that will stand, if wish to remain in the house that will endure, then we must enter and hold fast to what has been built by them. Amen.