

Homily for the Eve of the Feast of Saints Simon and Jude

A sermon preached in the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, Pusey House, Oxford, at the Sung Mass for the Eve of the Feast of Saints Simon and Jude, on Friday, 27 October 2023, by Mr Simon Billington, Ordinand, Wycliffe Hall, Oxford

If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. ST. JOHN 15.19

THE work of the Austrian Jewish novelist Stefan Zweig, whose popularity resided in the early decades of the twentieth century, still inspires creative enterprises more than 80 years after his death. In 2014, Wes Anderson produced an award-winning film based upon two of Zweig's novels, *Beware of Pity* and *The Post Office Girl*, the latter of which was published posthumously some 40 years after his death. Anderson's adaptation, *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, recognisable for its characteristic art direction, is a highly satirical masterpiece. When a priceless fictional Renaissance painting, *Boy with Apple*, is bequeathed to a hotel concierge, it sparks mayhem. The protagonists are marked out and made vulnerable to persecution by virtue of their inheritance, and whilst the escapades of its characters may seem wildly sensational, the reality it reflects is, I fear, far closer to the truth of humanity's capacity for avarice and jealousy. Tonight, as we celebrate

tomorrow's feast of Saints Simon and Jude, we are invited to pause and reflect on the inheritance that has been handed down to us through the ages. Our Gospel and Epistle readings give us both resolute warning and uplifting hope for our corporate responsibility to the Gospel, as the Church, the Bride of Christ.

St John is insistent that we understand that the hatred of the world for Christian believers is borne out of the distinction of the God-man, Jesus Christ, from the rest of the world. Our Gospel reading tonight is the ensuing half of that beautiful and vivid analogy of Christ's being the true vine and His Father the husbandman or the vine-grower: "I am the vine, ye are the branches, he that abideth in me and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing." Christ's forewarning of the hatred the Apostles would strive against in their mission to spread the Gospel, is fed out of this image that they, alongside us today, are branches of the true living vine, that we share an intimate life in Christ and He is us. In *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, the inheritance of *Boy with Apple* prompts a morally vapid heir to engage the services of a particularly ruthless assassin to murder its owner; in this there is something painfully, and woefully, recognisable about the nature of how we engage with desire. But a painting, like all objects of this world, is an item bound by corporality and temporality. It can be damaged, defaced, even destroyed.

Its appreciation and enjoyment is limited by the span of earthly life. When our gaze is reduced to the finite, then the items and pleasures become infinite. However, our faith in Christ, the vocation of being branches to His true vine, tended to and pruned by His Father, is a witness to the world of Christ's distinction. The fruits of virtue harvested by seeking to grow ever more closely into His image, being grafted ever more closely to his vine, are fruits that nourish and shape those around us as well as our own selves; and these are not of this world. We are walking, talking signs of Christ's ongoing salvific work in the world. Our very being here tonight, the proclaiming of the Lord's name in the morning by our lips and our commending of ourselves into His care at our going down to rest is the very true and real proclamation that He is risen and at work in the world; that He is living in us and we in Him. Moreover, it is not even by our own merit that we boast of faith in Christ, for what is that but the deception of Pride? Christ reveals Himself to us that we might have faith in Him, He chooses us out of the world that we might abide in in Him. This grafting of Christ to us as the true vine and the subsequent fruits that we may bear as a result of a life of ongoing sanctification and growth into His image is a glorious sign to the world that what we have inherited through Christ is not of this world; Jesus made the distinction clear to His disciples, as He does to us today: "I have chosen you out of the worldm

therefore the world hateth you.” Dr Pusey was himself all too familiar with this distinction and the necessity of cherishing it and nurturing it for the sake of the world. In the preface to his sermon ‘Holy Eucharist a comfort to the Penitent’, he wrote: “The more the truth prevails, the madder must the world become; the blasphemies with which holy truth is now assailed, are but a token of its victories.”

Whilst we would do well to harken unto Christ’s warnings of the roads and travails we must pass through in this earthly pilgrimage, we can do so emboldened that we do not do so alone. Christ ensures us that one will be sent after Him to testify to Him: “But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me”. The Comforter is the one who speaks to us in the pain of hearts, when the darkness of this world may seem all encompassing, silently smothering; it whispers to us, pointing the way to Jesus, directing us into all faithfulness. Christ sends the Spirit to us because He knows that we shall need it; as Angels galvanised Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane for what was ahead, so He sends us what is greater. “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; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also”. When we still our hearts before the presence of the Lord and listen

to that still small voice, our mouths will echo with the love of God and our testimony of salvation freely offered to all, just as it did for Saints Simon and Jude who have gone before us.

This evening's celebration of Saints Simon and Jude is a celebration of that example they set of their commitment to the Gospel, their fervency in the face of opposition, and their unwavering belief in the risen and glorified Christ. We know comparatively scant of their missionary endeavours. Some traditions hold that Saint Simon known as the Zealot or the Canaanite ventured to the East, others to Africa, and some reports even direct his journey to the sun-beaten terrains of Roman Britain. Whilst there is some obscurity about Saint Simon, we know even less about St Jude, aside from the Epistle that forms part of the canon of Holy Scripture. Tradition holds that these two Apostles were martyred together, forsaking their earthly life for the sake of the Gospel.

What they have passed on to us today is done so through the Church, that radiant Bride of Christ. The creed of our faith, what we profess boldly alongside all Christians of the world, identifies the Church as the locus for our corporate life. It is through the Church that our faith is upheld by the sacraments, it is through the church that our understanding of our Trinitarian faith is deepened through holy teaching, the Church is to where we retreat and from where we are propelled out

into the world so that we may “make disciples of all the nations”. And in each recitation of the creed, we identify the Church as being One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic, a church of free and unparalleled inheritance. The ministries of the church are a gift that have been handed down to each and every generation since the church was established by Christ and then spread through His Apostles. The Apostolic character of the Church gives us confidence that the customs, the teaching and the corporate life that we cherish and celebrate find their genesis in God incarnate, in Jesus Christ. Within the Church we can glimpse the ministry of Saints Simon and Jude. But their ministry has not ceased: they are still active in the world today. They continuously intercede to the Godhead for us, individually and corporately, and this must make us bold and confident that, with the grace of the Comforter to guide and sustain us, we may endeavour to remain distinct from the world. Let us look forward then and strive to continue their work so that the world may know our Risen Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.