28 October 2018: Choral Matins
Simon and Jude


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+ They have no knowledge—

    those who carry about their wooden idols,

    and keep on praying to a god

    that cannot save. (Is 48: 20)

October is a month that seems to have more than its fair share of both major and minor church festivals. Once we reach Halloween, we will this month have commemorated, among others, George Bell, Francis of Assisi, Wilfrid of Ripon, Edward the Confessor, and Martin Luther. But we will also have kept three major feasts: that of our own patron, St Frideswide, of St Luke the Apostle, and today that of two lesser-known of Christ’s twelve disciples: the apostles Simon and Jude.

In the various New Testament lists of the Twelve Apostles including that which we heard this morning (Matt 10:2-4; Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:14-16; Acts 1:13), the tenth and eleventh names given are Simon ‘who was called the Zealot’ and ‘Judas of James’. We know little about Simon, who does not otherwise appear in the gospels, and should clearly be distinguished from Simon Peter. Scholars have disputed whether his nickname, the Zealot, associates him with the Jewish independence movement described by Josephus, that argued for violent insurrection against the Roman occupying forces, or with any other group of zealots in first-century Palestine.

Judas, or Jude, was also called Thaddaeus or Lebbaeus, his nicknames distinguishing him from Judas Iscariot. It is often assumed that the description Judas as ‘of James’ means that he and the Apostle James (son of Alphaeus) were brothers. This Judas appears in St John’s account of Jesus’ last conversation with his disciples; an epistle in his name addressed to the whole Church is preserved in the New Testament.
In later traditions Simon and Jude are associated with one another in a missionary team, and said to have evangelised in Persia before being martyred together in 65 AD. One version of their various legends has it that Simon was martyred by being sawn in half, so he is often depicted bearing a saw. Jude may be most familiar as the patron saint of lost causes, the apostle about whom we are so ignorant that we turn only to his intercessory power once we have exhausted other, more familiar saints.

That we know so little about Simon or Jude makes it difficult to talk specifically about how they individually (or together) sought to follow the example that Jesus had given them, and specifically how they obeyed his injunction just before he ascended into heaven, that they should take the gospel ‘to the ends of the earth’. The keeping on a Sunday of the feast of another pair of apostles does, however, give us an opportunity to reflect on the charge that our bishop has given to this diocese over the coming year to think about how to proclaim the gospel afresh for a new generation.

Bishop Steven has a long-standing interest in Catechesis, namely the religious instruction given to neophytes, those new to the Christian faith, in order to prepare them for the sacraments of baptism and confirmation. The word catechesis appears in the New Testament as a term for Christian formation and preparation for baptism, and instruction for lifelong discipleship; indeed, the gospels were written as tools for this purpose. Luke opened the narrative of his gospel by addressing Theophilus, explaining that he wanted to write an orderly account for him, ‘so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed’, literally: about which you have been ‘catechised’ (Luke 1: 4).

The Acts of the Apostles shed considerable light on how, in the earliest days of the church, Christ’s disciples sought to bring new believers to the faith, showing their use of scripture as a basis for their preaching and their teaching. Think of the occasion when Philip taught the Ethiopian eunuch and brought him to baptism by explaining the meaning of a passage from Isaiah that the Ethiopian had just been reading (Acts 8: 26-38). But Simon and Jude do not appear in Acts. If we can make any assumptions about the nature of their missionary endeavours, we might imagine that they worked among gentiles as apostles, literally those sent out by Christ according to the instructions he gave them through the Holy Spirit to be his witnesses (Acts 1: 2, 8).

Both our first reading and our psalm this morning shed light on the difficulties encountered by those charged with mission beyond Israel, who had to preach salvation in
Christ Jesus to peoples who worshipped many gods. In our reading from Isaiah, Yahweh declared his status as Creator, and asserted the truth of his statements: ‘I the Lord speak the truth; I declare what is right’ (Is. 45: 19). Those witnesses whom he invited to come forward and challenge his claims, Yahweh promptly dismissed out of hand as worshippers of false idols: ‘those who have no knowledge, who carry about their wooden idols and pray to a god that cannot save.’ (v 20) Our psalm made a similar charge about the inefficacy of representations of other gods. ‘Their idols are silver and gold even the work of men’s hands. / They have mouths, and speak not; eyes have they, and see not. / .... They that make them are like unto them; and so are all such as put their trust in them.’ (Ps 115: 4-5, 8)

Yahweh stressed the hopelessness of following false gods; the final victory is achievable only in him.

Recent work on images and representation of idols in ancient Mesopotamia has stressed the inseparability of the material and spiritual worlds in this era. Cult statues – idols of wood, or silver, or gold – did more than represent the divine presence: they became objects in which the god could be found and approached. ‘We must think’, one scholar has argued, ‘in terms of a purely mystic unity, the statue mystically becoming what it represents, the god, without, however, in any way limiting the god, who remains transcendent. In so becoming, the statue ceases to be mere earthly wood, precious metal and stones, ceases to be the work of human hands. It becomes transubstantiated, a divine being, the god it represents.’ (T Jacobsen, ‘The graven image’, in Miller et al. eds., Ancient Israelite Religion (1987), pp. 22-3; quoted Herring, ‘A transubstantiated reality’, Vetus Testamentum 58, 2008, 1-15).

This understanding of the place of idols in non-monotheistic ancient religions helps us to set Isaiah’s words in better context. His argument – and that of the psalmist, objecting to objects that have feet but walk not, neither speak they through their throat – becomes more significant when we recognize that the image in ancient Mesopotamia was not conceptualized as a ‘mere statue or monument’; it was rather an extension or manifestation of the divine being that it represented. Against such idols, it was necessary to assert the claims of the God of Israel with more force, to show how he, and he alone, could be the people’s helper and defender (Ps 115, 10-11); to prove that only those who turned to him could be saved (Is 45: 22).

Apostles who took the Christian gospel to gentile peoples encountered the same difficulties. Simon and Jude among the Persians, Roman and Irish missionaries among the pagan English, Anglo-Saxons preaching to their compatriots in Germany east of the Rhine all
encountered peoples who worshipped many gods, and often represented them in figures of wood, or stone, or precious metals. Catechesis in the basis of the Christian faith necessarily involved first the demolition of the claims non-believers made about their own gods, overthrowing those deities as well as the images through which they offered their devotion. Only then could they be replaced with understanding of the one true God, Creator of heaven and earth, and of his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ who died for the sins of all.

How can we apply this to the Bishop’s charge to this diocese to renew Catechesis, to bring more new believers to faith in baptism and to reinforce the understanding of existing believers about the foundations of their faith? Today’s texts, and the example of all the apostles, but especially of Simon and Jude, encourage us to reconsider which gods in our own social and cultural context we need to reject. We might think complacently that we have no wooden, stone or metal idols set up in niches in our own houses, or in prominent places in our towns or in the countryside. Yet I wonder how many there are among us this morning who do not have a metal and plastic god in their own pocket or handbag, in the shape of a mobile phone. A false god if ever there were one, luring us into illusory ‘friendship’ with strangers we know only online, creating envy through images of the ‘perfect’ lifestyles of others, seducing us with pictures of objects that we do not need, but could buy with a single click.

The counterfeit gods of today’s world (to use the language of Timothy Keller) are all around us. We take things like the achievement of a successful career, sex, material possessions, even family and deify them in our hearts: we make them the centre of our lives, the things that we worship because we think they can give us significance, status, security and fulfilment. But we are wrong. On their own, these are as vain and empty as Mesopotamia’s wooden idols.

Catechesis means conveying the fundamentals of the Christian gospel that the apostles preached. It takes the form of teaching focused on four key texts: the Apostles’ Creed, the Beatitudes, the Commandments, and the Lord’s Prayer. Catechesis serves, in John Chrysostom’s beautiful words, ‘to create a strong echo of the living word of God in the heart of the believer.’ That is the task that Bishop Steven has set this diocese. Following the example of Simon and Jude, let us pray that God will refresh our vision, give us a clear sense of his will, and guide and strengthen us with his living presence. May those who proclaim the name of Christ to an unbelieving world find the grace to inspire new generations with the love of God and so form new disciples to take their place in the life and witness of the Church as newly-baptised Christians. Amen.