

Reformation Today: Jude 1: 1-25

It's easy to think that some things never change because their rate of change is so slow. Mountains, buildings and great institutions can seem like that can't they. But we know that mountains do change. Over time wind and rain and frost breakdown rocks and slowly but surely, mountains change shape. Buildings also gradually erode don't they. On our Camino trip in October, George and I walked across a Roman bridge that was almost 2000 years old. Of course, the bridge isn't in a good state of repair any more. It's been damaged by use, by rain, by frost, and by vandals wanting to use the stones for other purposes, and the same is true for our great castles and cathedrals. Of course, we want to do all we can to preserve these glorious buildings for posterity, which is why most ancient buildings always have a restoration project going on. To do nothing, when things are being gradually worn away, will mean that eventually the buildings will crumble to dust. And the same is true for great institutions like the church. Left alone they too will crumble.

Now as George reminded us last week, the church isn't a building; it's the people of God gathered both universally and locally, like here, in individual congregations. But without a constant restoration process on the spiritual church the gospel light of the church will flicker and die. And it isn't enough to rely on the fact that 500 years ago many great and glorious gospel truths were rediscovered in the Reformation. Over 500 years parts of mountains can crumble; over 500 years whole buildings can fall into disrepair and collapse; and over 500 years churches can gradually lose sight of the gospel they are called to proclaim, and whole nations can be plunged into spiritual darkness.

And this is nothing new. Since the age of the apostles, the church of Jesus Christ and the gospel it is called to proclaim has been under attack. That is why Jude wrote his letter. That's why the Reformation 500 years ago was so necessary. And it's why the church needs to be continually reforming itself to repair the damage done to its life and doctrine as it battles threats from without, from within and from amongst God's people.

So, this morning we are going to think about those three threats and how we can stand firm against them. And to help us do that, we are going to spend a little time looking at this short letter from Jude. Jude identifies himself as the brother of James, one of the brothers of Jesus. It seems that it was written somewhere between 50 and 80 A.D. and it's possible that it is one of the earliest letters recorded in the New Testament. So, do turn to it now; it's on page 1231 of your church Bibles.

The beginning of the letter is interesting. After the opening greeting, Jude says that he wanted to write a different letter but that circumstances had forced his hand in a different direction. He wanted to write positive things to encourage them and to build them up in their faith in Christ, but the church was under threat and he felt compelled, he says in verse 3, *"to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people."*

The focus of Jude's letter is the threat from false teachers amongst God's people, but I want to start by outlining two other threats which we need to recognise and defend ourselves from. Here's the first one:

1: The threat from the world outside.

If I asked you what had contributed to make you the person you are today I guess you'd list many factors. You might mention your family, your education, and the communities in which you have lived. You'd probably mention your genes, your experiences and your friends, and given enough time I suspect the books you have read, the music you've listened to and the films and TV you have watched would also get a look in. And the list would go on and on and on because everything and everyone we encounter in the world around us shapes our character.

And if that's true for us as individuals, it is also true of the church. Each local church exists in a given time and a given culture and both those things will have an effect on the church.

Now some of the things culture promotes are morally neutral. Musical tastes change from generation to generation, and from culture to culture, and are ultimately a matter of taste, and not of biblical truth. What people wear to church and what church buildings look like also change from culture to culture, and actually it's great that they do. We worship a creative God who has made us creative people who enjoy different cultural expressions and there is no set pattern for Sunday dress or church building design in the Bible!

But what if the prevailing culture emphasises and promotes moral standards or practices that run contrary to the gospel? What if the culture is offering a different narrative for what life is all about which runs counter to the gospel? Is it right to adopt those things? Of course not! And yet because the sin and fallenness of the world, every culture will find itself fighting against God's commands and his original intentions in some areas. And unless things are noticed and countered then slowly but surely, ungodly aspects of culture will work their way into the church and sacred gospel truths will be eroded away until all the church has left is merely a shadow of gospel truth.

That's the first threat: the world outside. The second problem is much closer to home:

2: The threat from the sin within.

If we were perfect and sinless, if our hearts were perfectly in line with God's heart then the world outside and its culture would be no threat to our spiritual lives or the life and doctrine of the church. Jesus lived for 33 years in this broken, sinful world and never sinned – so it isn't the world's problem; it's ours!

As human beings we carry in us the DNA of Adam and his sin. In our natural state, our hearts are turned away from God and it is only by the sovereign act of God's grace and mercy in sending Jesus and drawing us to have faith in him that we are rescued from death and sin and brought into his kingdom of light. But since we are not made perfect until we see Jesus face-to-face in glory, between now and then we find our two natures wrestling with each other, and oftentimes the sinful nature wins.

And that sinful nature means that when the world whispers falsehoods about Jesus and his kingdom, part of us wants to believe them. When the world tells us that we would be far more popular and face far less criticism if we would simply change our thinking, part of us craves the easy life. When the world declares that ultimate happiness and joy and fulfilment really can be found in temporary pleasures rather than the things of God, part of us is ready to pack our bags and head off in the world's direction. Because of sin our internal moral-truth compass is faulty, and left unchecked we will gradually drift off course. And as individuals drift off course, so the church drifts with them.

Do you remember the Royal Navy warship from the Bond movie 'Tomorrow Never Dies' I mentioned a few weeks ago? Someone had interfered with the GPS signal and without knowing it, the ship had sailed into enemy waters. We can't let that happen to us or to God's church. We must remain humble, recognise our sinful natures, and keep coming back again and again to the Scriptures so that our spiritual compasses can be reset to God's true north. Because if we don't, we too, will slowly but surely drift off course and find ourselves in perilous waters.

We face threats from the world outside and threats from the sin within. But whilst they are both real and dangerous, Jude is writing because the threat in his day came from...

3: False teachers amongst God's people.

One of the things that is clear from Jude's letter is that God's people have been under threat since almost the beginning of time. Jude mentions angels who, though they stood in the presence of God, sought glory for themselves and rebelled against him. Jude speaks of Cain, whose pride led him to kill his brother Abel. He speaks of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah whose inhabitants suppressed their God-given consciences to justify their own behaviour. And he speaks of Balaam who sought money rather than God, and Korah who encouraged the Israelites to rebel against Moses for his own personal gain. Rebellion against God is nothing new, and so often God's people get led astray by leaders who set them a bad example, who have selfish motives and who preach things contrary to the Word of God. And that is the threat to which Jude is responding in this letter.

Now we not told all the details of what these false teachers were preaching, but in verse 4 Jude tells us that they *“pervert the grace of our God into a licence for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only sovereign and Lord.”* So perhaps they had been teaching that because we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in the finished work of Christ alone, then our works, our life styles doesn't matter. And of course, if our works really don't matter, then why not live how we like? Why not indulge ourselves in whatever way takes our fancy? Why not get drunk every day of the week and treat people as objects for our pleasure? Why not? If how we live is unimportant! And it seems from verses 8, 10, 11 and 12 that these false teachers were practising what they preached. And as they lived that way and taught that way the real danger was that some within the church would be drawn away too.

But how we live does matter. As disciples of Jesus we are called to be a holy people, belonging to God, reflecting his character to the world by how we live! And to claim that the grace of God is a licence to live how we like is a perversion of the truth used by these false teachers to justify their own desires. Ultimately, verse 19, these people do not have the Holy Spirit, but are being led by the flesh. Ultimately the promises they make and the gospel they offer is hopeless and empty. Verse 12 describes them as *“clouds without rain, autumn trees without fruit.”* And ultimately these men are real trouble. For their own purposes and for their own temporary gain they are leading God's people astray. It is no wonder that Jude tells us in verse 13 that they are *“those for whom blackest darkness has been reserved for ever.”*

Friends this is a huge deal. The church is the bride of Christ, for which he suffered and died. To claim to be teaching the truth but actually preaching something contrary to the Scriptures that will lead people away from Christ is something condemned in the strongest possible manner here and throughout the New Testament. Paul and others are incredibly strong in their condemnation of such people. And yet where are these false teachers? They are sitting and eating with the church. They are part of the community. They are sharing around the communion table, part of the fellowship, part of the church family.

How can that have happened? How can it be that so soon after the death and resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Spirit that so many churches were falling prey to false teachers?

Well we looked at two reasons earlier: the threat from the world outside and the sin that is within. Put those things together and when a preacher comes teaching things that would make your life easier, things that your itching fleshly ears want to hear, then unless you are ready to stand your ground and fight your corner and trust God's Word then you will be led astray.

Why is reformation important today? Because the pull of Christ-denying culture and our self-centred, sinful nature will always open the door to false teachers. And unless we can recognise the threats, be busy about repairing the damage and are able to counter their arguments then from without and within and amongst the church of God will come tumbling down.

So how do we stand firm? How do we, in the words of Jude, *“contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people”*? Let me give you 4 ways.

1: Know the truth. Your only hope of recognising false teaching is if you know the truth. I saw a shocking statistic a couple of weeks ago about the percentage of Anglicans who read the Bible each day. It was pitifully small. Now I know that figure includes people who call themselves Anglicans, but don't go to church, but I wonder whether you would be embarrassed about how infrequently you read the Scriptures. How many of you, I wonder, read the Bible every day as a matter of course? If you don't do that you will not know the truth and you will be led into error. The pull of the world and our sinful nature are too strong to resist unless we are actively swimming in the opposite direction by reading and studying God's word. Know the truth.

2: Believe the truth. The only gospel that will save is the gospel of Jesus revealed in the Scriptures. It was this gospel, the gospel we have been unpacking for the last six weeks, that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people. This is the gospel that Jesus preached, that the apostles declared, that the martyrs died for and that the scriptures teach.

And we must not only know the truth in our heads we need to believe it in our hearts. So, trust God. Trust his word. Trust his promises. Choose to actively and daily put your trust in the one who died on the cross for you. If you do not stand on the truth of God's Word, my friends, I tell you, you will not stand at all. Believe the truth.

3: Live the truth. Jesus calls us to be his disciples, to walk in his footsteps. Knowing and believing is not enough. True faith shows itself by our works and by our lifestyle and when we do live it out something amazing happens: our faith grows as a result. Putting thoughts into practise reinforces those thoughts and strengthens our faith so make sure you live out the truth. As you read the Bible each day ask God to show you how what you have read should change the way you live. The gospel isn't just a theory: it's a way of life. Know the truth, believe the truth and live the truth.

And finally,

4: Contend for the truth. Be ready to speak up for Jesus. Be ready to defend the Scriptures and the hope they proclaim. And be ready to suffer for the sake of Christ. Our society has rejected the idea of objective truth and gets upset when claims to unchanging truth are made. But that is what we have in the Bible. Our society champions the rights of the individual, and there is much to be applauded in that, but this is God's world, he made it, he made us, and if we are going to truly flourish then living God's way will ultimately be the best way, even if in the short-term it looks difficult and costly.

Now I know that it's easier just to keep quiet, to keep our faith to ourselves, to avoid the subject, but we are called to go and proclaim the gospel everywhere, starting where we are. And if that brings us into conflict with our society, then so be it. Of course, we need to be gracious, we need to be gentle, but we need to be firm. Jude writes to a church under attack and says contend for the faith. Contend for the truth once entrusted to the saints. Don't be shy. For too long in this country faithful Christians have hidden their faith because they have believed the lie that religion is a private matter and they were too worried about what people would say. And the result of that silence has been an accelerating decline in the morals of our society, and a dramatic rise in the number of number of people who have never even heard of the gospel of Jesus. Now is not the time to stay silent. Now is the time to contend for the truth.

And these battles need to be fought out there in the world, in the workplace, in the home, at the golf club or wherever we hang out, as we witness for Jesus. But those battles also need to be fought in the church.

It seems to me that in the Church of England there are two fights going on right now. One is about the uniqueness of Jesus, that he is the only way to be saved and that all other religions are therefore false and ultimately demonic in origin. Believing that today puts us at odds with a society which rejects objective truth. And sadly, many in the church, including many in positions of authority, are weakening their stance on this issue. Rather than standing firm on the gospel, contending for the truth, they are trying to be popular, welcoming, and inclusive so that no one would be offended by the gospel. But friends, the Bible does not teach that there are many ways to God. Jesus said that he was the way, the truth and the life and that no one comes to the Father except through him. And if we deny that, if we let ourselves get swept along by the multicultural vision of a melting pot of religions, then we will be dishonouring Christ, denying our hope, and preaching a false gospel which cannot save.

The second battle is around sexual ethics and gender identity. As you've heard me say before, the Bible's clear and unambiguous teaching is that sex belongs only in the context of heterosexual marriage, and up until the last decade or so, this had been the Church's settled teaching for almost 2000 years. But now, because of the huge pressure from society and the weakness in our sinful nature, many in the church are changing their views and are arguing for the church to change its teaching. Many have succumbed because they fear conflict with the world; some have been swayed because someone they love has come out as gay or because they are gay themselves; others have simply lost any confidence that the Bible is God's perfectly inspired and truthful Word!

As a result, there are now a whole number of bishops in the Church of England, and many senior clergy in our diocese, actively campaigning for a change. And I have to tell you friends that I fear for the future of the Church of

England if we give in on these issues. To go forward with the blessing of same-sex relationships, conduct gay marriages or to wholeheartedly embrace ideas of gender fluidity will put us at odds with the clear teaching of Scripture. And to open the doors to salvation being found outside faith in Jesus is to deny Christ, to denigrate the cross and to preach a different gospel which simply cannot save.

Our faith, the faith of the apostles, the faith once entrusted to the saints, the faith in which the Church of England is rooted stands on the Bible as God's inspired and true Word which is equally applicable to each and every generation and culture around the planet. It is that Word which is unchanging, sure and certain. We must not let ourselves be led astray by the pull of the flesh or the influence of the world or the sweet soft sounds of the serpent, masquerading as an angel of light. The call from Jude, the call to all Christians everywhere across all ages, is to contend for the faith once and for all entrusted to the saints.

We need to be aware of the threats that come from society out there, from the sin within, and from the false teachers that sometimes come in amongst God's people. But it isn't enough simply to know the threats. We need to know the truth, believe the truth and live the truth. And as I hope you've seen this morning, we must also contend for the truth. To sit back and do nothing is to leave God's glorious church to crumble bit by bit until its gospel light is lost from the nation.

We won't always get it right. We won't always contend in the right way. We won't always stand firm. But when we fail, as we will, we need to come back again to God to ask for his forgiveness, to ask that he would transform us by the renewing of our minds and to seek his strength to stand. That's why the church needs to be constantly reforming. That's why reformation is vital today. It's vital for us as individuals, it's vital for the local church and it's vital for the Church of England and the church around the world. May we play our part so that our children and our children's children get to hear the gospel that brings life and peace and hope and eternal life for those who trust in Christ. Amen.