

Simon and Jude 2018 Evensong

1 Maccabees 2: 42 – 66; Jude 1 – 4, 17 – end

This evening's readings have had us scampering around trying to find rarely read parts of the Bible. Had Christine not told us in her 10.30 sermon that Jude was the penultimate book in the Bible I think I might have been struggling to locate it more accurately than "somewhere towards the back end of the New Testament." And as for 1 Maccabees, well, it's not really part of the Bible at all; so many people's copies won't even have it printed in them.

It was only at Easter last year that we got the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translation of the bible at the Priory. The particular editions we got have the Books of the Apocrypha in them as well. They are acknowledged holy text that are pre-Christian but were written after the close of the canon of the Old Testament. So they're good reputable holy texts, but not quite pukka Bible. Sometimes they're printed in

Bibles between the Old and New Testaments, as they are in our NRSVs. And as the novelty of having these new bibles hasn't quiet worn off yet, I'm always keen to read from the Apocrypha whenever the lectionary gives us the opportunity to do so.

Now the Book of Jude is almost apocryphal in the other sense of the word. It's not part of *the* Apocrypha; it's not late Jewish pre-Christian; it's very definitely Christian; but it's been sometimes thought to be of rather dodgy provenance and its inclusion in the Bible has been questioned. Scholars at the Reformation, including Calvin, were rather ambivalent about Jude and it clung on in the canon of the Bible by the skin of its teeth, even though Luther relegated it to the appendix of his 1522 German translation of the New Testament without any reference to it in the table of contents!

However, the fact of the matter is that it is part of the Bible. Having said that, though, one of the classic

commentators of the mid C20th¹ has described it as “uncongenial” to modern readers because they are “put off by [its] almost unrelievedly denunciatory tone.” And it has to be said that our reading from 1 Maccabees is frankly uncongenial too. With our contemporary awareness of the horrors of female genital mutilation, exhortations for religious zealots to go around circumcising uncircumcised boys makes for frankly unacceptable reading.

So I think, really, to get any benefit or illumination from these readings this evening’s readings we have to look at them in the broadest terms and see whether we can discern any overall theme without getting too bogged down in distasteful detail. And it seems to me that both are encouragements to hang on in there in the face of challenges to faith. In the case of 1 Maccabees the challenge was perhaps the hostility of nations around the Jewish people in around 100BC; in the case of Jude the challenge is a watering down of

¹ J.N.D.Kelly “Epistles of Peter and of Jude” [1969] p.223

Christianity, perhaps to overlook the centrality of Christ to Christianity and to re-assimilate into mainstream Jewish practice - perhaps.

Certainly, faith is very challenged in our contemporary context. I think it’s only something like 2% of the population who regularly go to church. I think it just tends to be assumed that sane people, in liberal western democracies at least, have left organised religion behind. And sometimes it’s tempting to join them.

I often think it would be fascinating to be able to look back at our age in 2 or 300 years’ time and to be able to see whether we’re simply living through a blip in religious thought or whether organised religion is just running out of steam and grinding to a halt.

If it is all grinding to a halt, then the ferocity of extreme, fundamentalist religion, both in its Christian and Islamic expression, is to be seen as the violent

death throes of that terminal process. And if that's right, then the sane, rational, secular part of me hopes it gets on with it as quickly as possible, burns itself out and then we can put religion to bed. Although I don't know what we then do with all this built heritage, not to mention the musical and artistic and literary heritage that goes with it. But there's such a lot of unattractive, hateful religion about that it's difficult not to sympathise with those that say it's time we all grew out of it.

On the other hand – I don't know where I've got this figure from, but I've got it in my head from somewhere - even now 85% of the world's population is religious. And in terms of the historical perspective of human history, all people have always been religious: the present irreligious generations are statistically insignificant within the field of all the people who have ever lived in human history. So the odds are that this is just a historical blip, an anomaly, and that it's worth hanging on in there for all the blessings that we see

leaping out of the pages of the Bible, and many of which from Abraham to Daniel were rehearsed for us this evening by the author of 1 Maccabees: "Remember" he says, "the deeds of the ancestors, which they did in their generations; and you will receive great honour and an everlasting name."

I once received a letter from a friend, shortly after we graduated - in the days when people wrote letters – from a friend with whom I've now sadly lost touch, a letter in which he set out a poem by Emily Dickenson. I wrote it in my commonplace book but committed it to memory as well. And it's given me great succour over the subsequent 30 years or whatever.

Those, dying then, knew where they went:

They went to God's right hand.

That hand is amputated now and God cannot be found.

The abdication of belief makes behaviour small.

Better an *ignis fatuus* than no illume at all.

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

I'm not prepared to abdicate belief. That would be an abdication, an abdication from a way of life to which I believe I have been called. I still believe it makes behaviour bigger and better, and gives life in all its fullness.

And so let us be blessed and placed into God's safe keeping by the final words of the book of Jude which, for such an obscure book, are remarkably familiar:

And now unto him that is able to keep us from falling, and to present us faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and for ever.
Amen.