

## **ST SIMON & ST JUDE**

After women were first ordained in Ireland in 1990 people didn't quite get their heads around the idea that there was more than one of us! On several occasions I was told I had done a good job at a wedding or a funeral in a church that I knew I had never been in! And protest as I did with one lady that it was not me that conducted a wedding she very confidently assured me that it certainly was and I was very good.

My friend got mistaken on several occasions for the Vicar of Dibley as she did have a striking resemblance to Dawn French but the time that she was more perplexed with was being mistaken for a priest called Margaret who was 30 years older and had a peach rinse at the time!

Simon and Jude, the 2 disciples, we remember today also have stories of Mistaken Identity.

Simon is NOT Simon the brother of Jesus, and NOT Simon Peter, while Jude or Judas was NOT Judas the brother of Jesus nor Judas Iscariot. Even in the Beatles song Hey Jude it should have been Hey Jules as it was written by Paul McCartney for John Lennon's son Julian after his parents' divorce.

Yes, Simon and Jude have the unfortunate distinction of being defined by who they are not.

The only information about Simon in the Gospels is his name on the list of disciples. Jude goes one better by being recorded as asking Jesus a question during the Last Supper. But apart from that, as far as the Gospels go – Nothing. Yet they were important enough and had gifts for Jesus to call them as two of the 12 disciples.

So, first of all, the feast day of Simon and Jude is a recognition of the value of those who don't become famous or well-known, those who are only defined by who they are not. If asked I suppose we could easily name some of the 12 disciples – Peter, John, Matthew, Andrew and Judas Iscariot, maybe Bartholomew (because it is a great name!). But Simon and Jude are a bit obscure to most of us.

But not obscure in the eyes of Jesus.

Some time ago, I came across a phrase that has stuck in my mind. It was about the call of Gideon in the Old Testament.

The Jews were having a hard time trying to survive the attacks of neighbouring powers and were in need of a new leader. An angel was sent to Gideon to say God was calling him to take that role. And Gideon replied, "How can I deliver Israel. My clan is the weakest and I am the least in my family." (Judges 6:15) But God persisted and this is what one commentator has said, "God sent an angel to tell a nobody that he a somebody in God's sight."

Nobody is a nobody in God's eyes and in God's heart. Like Simon and Jude we may be obscure and feel we don't count for much compared to others who take the lead and seem to do so much. But in God's eyes all are equal, all are important. As today's epistle puts it, "You are no longer strangers or aliens, but citizens with the saints and members of the household of God."

Nobody's a nobody. We are all somebody to God. God loves each of us as if there was only one person left to love.

What we do know from the names and associations of Simon and Jude is that they had once been a pair of political firebrands, dedicated to opposing Rome and anyone who cooperated with Rome. Simon is called "the Zealot". The Zealots were known to have carried little daggers on their person to assassinate anyone to do with the Empire or who collaborated with the Empire – Roman or Jew. Simon in his earlier life had been a religious and political fanatic.

It has been said that Jesus didn't make life easy for himself in those he chose as disciples.

For, remember, he also chose Matthew who collected taxes for the Romans. And with all the fervent nationalism swirling around, Matthew would have been near the top of the Zealots' hit list as a collaborator. But remarkably, Simon and Matthew were not only contained but cooperated together in the band of the 12 disciples. And Jude or Judas came from the same stock as Simon.

The 12 disciples had their share of strong characters with strong opinions. As we heard in our Gospel this morning, as the end of Jesus' ministry draws near, Jesus' command to them was "to love one another" – a love that was being tested by the diverse backgrounds of the disciples, and which would be tested even more in the future when, as Jesus warned them, there would be hard times and even persecution.

But despite their differences they held together. They held together because of their common love for, and obedience of, Jesus which was more important than their personal prejudices and deeply held convictions.

And in the way they held together we have an example of how we as Christians and how we as a church should and can deal with difference.

In churches and among church members there will be disagreements as strongly held opinions clash. Things will sometimes be said that divide rather than unite. There can be tensions and fall-outs – because we are human.

But the church is also divine, and what held the disciples together was their common loyalty and love for Jesus. That love for Jesus and for each other superseded their own personal prejudices and so unity and a common cause was maintained.

As the well-known song from the musical 'Aspects of Love' puts it, "Love changes everything." It certainly changed the firebrands Simon and Jude.

And thirdly, tradition has it that after the Ascension Simon and Jude took the Gospel to Persia, where they suffered martyrdom – tradition has it Simon was sawn in half! As Zealots they would have been focussed and single-minded, and it was these gifts and characteristics that Jesus was able to use to spread the Gospel.

God works with rather than against our gifts. God uses what we have and what we are in his service.

Remember how Jesus singled out for special mention the poor widow who put her mite, her penny, into the collection box rather than the many shekels contributed by the rich.

God uses and delights in whatever we offer him, however insignificant we may think it is.

There is an old story about a circus performer who became a monk. His gifts were neither intellectual nor practical and he felt himself to be of little use. His fellow monks saw him going into the chapel more frequently than was deemed necessary and one day quietly followed him. There they saw him not on his knees praying but doing handstands on the altar and juggling with the silver – offering his gifts to God who, we can be sure, took pleasure in them.

Over the years many duos have delighted and entertained us – Morecambe and Wise, French and Saunders, the Two Ronnies to name a few.

Today's duo, Simon and Jude, who at one time would have been head-splitters rather than side-splitters, have much to teach and encourage us.

Not on the A list of disciples, they assure us that in God's eyes, nobody's a nobody. Each of us is important to God and is a somebody.

They are examples of dealing with difference. Pulling together in the service of Christ.

And God can use our gifts, however small or unusual or exotic and always accepts the praise and thanks we bring in whatever way we can.