

“BUT YOU, DEAR FRIENDS ...”

Jude 1-25

On one of the drive-time shows on BBC Radio 2 – possibly when Chris Evans was still doing it – they used to have an occasional feature called *The Gear Change*. It involved playing songs that part way through have a clunking great change of key and/or tempo. If you listen to a lot of power ballads, for example, especially from the 1980s and 1990s, they have a really unsubtle shift as the whole arrangement moves into a different key and the singer ups the power of his or her voice – hence the name of the feature, because it was like a bus or a truck going up a hill and having to change gear really obviously.

Well, there are several of those in the New Testament. Not, of course, musical gear changes, but what appear to be drastic changes of direction in the thinking of the writer – usually, it has to be said, Paul. He will be getting up a head of steam about something that upsets him – a set of sins or a false teacher or a wrong attitude – and then there will be a big “*But ...*” and he lurches off in another direction to show us what the alternative should be. We saw it recently in *Galatians 5* where Paul was getting worked up about the “*acts of the sinful nature*” – all those things we find ourselves doing because of our natural propensity to sin – and then in v22 of that chapter he changes gear with one of these big buts and tells us about “*the fruit of the Spirit*”.

And there’s another classic example of that phenomenon in the reading we’ve just heard from the little book of *Jude* towards the end of the New Testament. This is the last of the epistles in the New Testament and is one of the shortest. I suspect not many of us have ever read it, but you heard the whole letter this morning. It’s written by Jude – a shortened form of the Hebrew name Judah and Greek name Judas, a fairly popular name at the time. Most people accept that this was one of Jesus’ brothers. There was a Judas who was an apostle (apart from Judas Iscariot), but this one refers to himself not as an apostle but as a “*servant of Jesus Christ*”, and identifies himself as “*a brother of James*”, the first leader of the church in Jerusalem, who was also one of Jesus’ brothers. It is thought to have been written about 65AD.

The letter is not written to a specific group of people as, for example, *Galatians* or *Romans* was. This was written to be circulated around the Christian community, “*to those who have been called, who are loved by God the Father and kept by Jesus Christ.*” Its main purpose seems to be to warn the growing Christian community about the heresies that are starting to infect the church. For all sorts of reasons, the message of the Gospel was starting to get mixed up, watered down and generally messed about with. Sometimes this was due to people whose enthusiasm was getting the better of their knowledge and they were talking about the Gospel without really understanding it all for themselves. (You may recall that Paul came across someone called Apollos for whom that was the case – *Acts 18:24-26*.) There were others, though, who were less innocent in their motives. Some Jewish believers wanted all new

Christians to become Jews. Others saw opportunities to make money out of this new belief – and, again, Paul always insisted that he was not in it for the money. Others saw it as a means of gaining power – over groups, over individuals – and yet others as a way of achieving some kind of celebrity or of cloaking their own immorality. In *v8,16* Jude identifies some of these issues and if you read through the other letters of the New Testament, you can see how the writers were all aware of these manipulations of the Gospel message. And, sadly, there is still plenty of that around today, from the Prosperity Gospel to child abuse, from embezzlement of church funds to emotional and psychological power games.

In warning his readers about all this, Jude uses some pretty strong language. The forthrightness with which he attacks the false teachers and perverters of the Gospel seems very alien to our way of thinking and preaching today – and maybe we have watered down our opposition to such things – but he leaves us in no doubt that this is all wrong, and the objects of his criticism are denounced in no uncertain terms. Just look at what he says in *v11,12*. It's all very confrontational stuff.

And then comes the first gear change, the first “*But*”. In *v17* he points out that this was all predicted by the apostles. They had said this would happen and he points out that these false teachers and people whose teaching are starting to cause divisions are people who “*do not have the Spirit*” (*v19*). Then comes the really big “*But*” at the beginning of *v20* and that's where we're going to focus our thinking this morning. It's a useful reminder to us, as we get back into things after the summer break, of what we're about as followers of Jesus Christ.

You see, it's very easy to spot the negatives, to major on the stuff that is wrong, to criticise the people who aren't doing it all right. There's almost a voyeuristic prurience in pointing out the faults of others, of highlighting the things that are wrong. That, of course, is how the mainstream media make their money. I think I mentioned a prayer by the 3rd century saint Eusebius a few weeks back – I was quoting the bit about asking God to help us “*keep tame that which rages within us*”. The prayer also contains the lines “*May I never discuss who is wicked and what wicked things he has done*”, because we are all, I think, attracted by the seedier side of life, as you can see in newspaper articles, television programmes and magazines with titles such as *Mass Murderers*. The important thing, though, is to ensure that we do not think or behave like that. Jude realises that, so after outlining the faults and failings of the false teachers and flawed leaders, he points out how the true disciples of Jesus should live and how they can guard against being sucked in by the wrong teachings.

“*But you, dear friends ...*” That phrase is also translated in different places as “*dearly beloved*”. Jude really does want the best for the people to whom he is writing. He is writing this out of a deep concern for them, the kind of deep concern that any pastor should have for his or her congregation or community.

These are people, remember, whom Jude identifies in the opening sentence of his letter as having been “*called by God*”, people who have an eternal destiny within God’s plan. They are “*loved by God*”, so Jude, as a servant of Jesus Christ, is constrained to love them too, to want them to live in such a way as to fulfil that destiny. And they are “*kept by Jesus Christ*”. Along with Jesus, Jude wants them to stay that way, to be kept safe from the consequences of falling for false teaching and wandering off along the wrong paths.

And that’s still the case today. As followers of Jesus, we need to make sure that we are not going down that path of false teaching, not departing from the Gospel, nor trying to use the Gospel for our own ends – a cloak for immorality, a means of self-aggrandisement, a pretext to feather our own nests at the expense of others. So we too need to heed Jude’s words. How do we do that? Well, there are three things here we can do to help us stay close to Jesus and ensure that we fulfil our destiny. They involve **Learning from the Past, Living in the Present and Looking to the Future**.

1. **LEARN FROM THE PAST**

Jude tells his readers to “*Build yourselves up in your most holy faith*”. This is the foundation, the bedrock of our Christian development. Without an awareness of what constitutes our faith we can easily be swept off course. And our faith is based on what has already happened: that’s why we can trust it. Our faith is not in something that might happen, or could happen if the circumstances are right, or is simply the most attractive option from a whole list of possibilities. Our faith is in **what God has done**. There is an objectivity to it that encourages us to trust.

God somehow created a world, the world in which we live, a world which was originally perfect and just as he wanted it. God put humanity in the world to work with him to take care of it and to get the best out of all that he had made. Sadly, the open options which he gave men and women, the freedom of choice which was an innate part of our humanity, led to evil finding a way in. Humanity became infected with that evil and sin was born. The good creation was tainted by that as men and women followed their own ways and chose not to care for the world as God intended.

But God still wanted the best for his beloved creatures, he wanted his perfect creation back. He needed to destroy evil and deal with the consequences of sin for humanity. Our Old Testament is a record of the way in which he kept giving people opportunities to respond and get back on track, but every time it went wrong. So in the end he sent Jesus, part of his own being identified as his Son, and Jesus through his astonishing death on the cross and his subsequent resurrection dealt with the problem, acting as a kind of

lightning conductor for evil and neutralising its effects on humans. So now we can be sure that God will eventually restore his creation and us with it, allowing us to spend eternity with him in his Kingdom – if we are prepared to put our faith in him and live our lives believing that he wants the best for us.

That, in a very simplified nutshell, is what our faith rests on – and that has already happened: God has already done all that. So we need to keep *“building ourselves up in it”*, bolstering our faith day by day by reminding ourselves of it. How do we do that? Through reading about it in the Bible – day by day reading this amazing book and taking note of what it says, reflecting on it and thinking carefully about how it applies to us. We do it by reminding each other of what God has done and is doing – in our conversations; in our attendance here; through joining a housegroup, perhaps. You really do need to get your feet solidly on this foundation. In *Isaiah 7:9b*, the prophet tells King Ahaz: *“If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.”*

Learn the story of salvation, of what God has done. There is an objective basis to all this, an historical reality to what we believe. But also look around and see what he is doing now, how God is at work in your life and in the lives of others and in the wider world. Which leads us into our next point. Don't only **Learn from the Past** but ...

2. LIVE IN THE PRESENT

That objective, historical basis needs to be allowed to affect your experience now. It's all very well knowing stuff about what has happened, but that needs to make a difference to what happens in the present. That's the same with all history, I suppose. If we don't learn from the past, the present is a bit of a mess. Through Jesus Christ God has made possible a new life for you, a new future, an eternal destiny. He has made possible your citizenship in his Kingdom.

And Jude suggest that we do that by *“praying in the Holy Spirit”*. That verb is one which suggests continuous activity – *“keep on praying in the Holy Spirit”*. Keep open the lines of communication between you and God. (We'll come back to that in a moment.)

But also he says, *“Keep yourselves in God's love”*. We are to guard what we have, to keep reminding ourselves of what God has done and is doing. As with any human relationship of love, keep that love alive, pay attention to the relationship and don't take it for granted. Don't let anyone or anything spoil it for you by getting between you and God. Jesus used the image of a plant, a vine, to make that point in *John 15:1-8*. It's a relationship as intimate as a shoot with the main plant.

And that love is to be kept alive – as in any loving relationship – by good communication. That’s where the praying comes in. Keep talking to God, speaking to him about what is going on, about your own life and your own needs and aspirations, about how much you love him – that’s worship, what we do here on Sundays. You may feel you need a set time to do that, or you may be someone who is constantly talking to God as the day goes by.

But don’t just talk to God: listen to him as well. He speaks through his word, the Bible, so keep reading that, as we’ve already said. Reflect on it, re-evaluate things and keep thinking about how things are going. Talk to other people about it. Grow and develop in your relationship with God as you pray and as you study. But be constantly on the alert, as Peter tells us in *1 Peter 5:8,9*. Don’t take any of this for granted and be active in your cultivation of the relationship. And to encourage you in that ...

3. LOOK TO THE FUTURE

Sometimes, if we’re honest, keeping yourself in God’s love can be hard work. This world is not yet restored to the state God wants. There is still plenty that goes wrong and can cause you to wonder, even to doubt – whether it’s Hurricane Harvey or a persistent toothache, North Korea and the United States’ sabre-rattling or a neighbour who clearly doesn’t like you. As we build ourselves up by learning from what God has already done, and as we live out our faith in the here and now, we can also look to the future and encourage ourselves by anticipating what is in store for those who stick with Jesus.

You see, this faith stuff isn’t some duty we have fulfil just for the sake of it or to keep someone else happy. There is an end in view, a reward, if you like, at the end of it all. We are actually waiting for something, and something specific. Jude tells us here that we are waiting for “*the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring us to eternal life.*” In case the readers of this little letter were afraid that they might have to undergo the fate awaiting the false teachers and Gospel deniers that he describes in *vv7,13-15*, Jude reminds them that their destiny is to spend eternity with Jesus, to live in God’s renewed and restored Kingdom, enjoying life – eternal life – as God originally intended. He is telling them that this is worth doing. There is a point to all this.

Part of our difficulty in sticking to our faith, I reckon, is that we don’t really take that eternal perspective; we lose sight of what we have in store. Maybe it’s just too far from our experience, or maybe we’re too weighed down with the nitty-gritty of this current existence – perhaps we are concentrating too much on the detail: the what, when and where of the end times – whatever it is, we miss out the sweet anticipation

of what is to come. No, we don't know the details – and, as Jesus told his first disciples, we're not supposed to know all that – but we do know that this will be something very special, something well worth waiting for. Eternity with Jesus in a perfect world, with everything just as God wants it so that we can get the very best from it not just for a few years, but for ever – surely that is an amazing thought, far better than anything we might anticipate in the here and now.

There's an awful lot going on in our world that can cause us to despair, to worry, to capitulate even. There's an awful lot going on in the Church around the world that we wish wasn't happening, as we hear the headline stories of fallen leaders and corrupt congregations. There's an awful lot that actually we might be tempted to join in with because it seems to provide an easier or a more glamorous experience of our faith. *“But you, dear friends”*, learn from the past and make sure your faith is firm. Put that into practice in the present as you pray and read the Bible and worship and witness. And look to the glorious future that God has prepared for you, that is your destiny, and that can inspire and motivate you as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

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Questions for discussion

- 1) How would you explain the "*most holy faith*" in which we are to build ourselves up? What are the things that are non-negotiable in our faith? How do we see those things distorted by false teachers and others?
- 2) In what sense is our faith "objective"? How important is experience?
- 3) What do you think Jude means by "*pray in the Holy Spirit*"? Isn't all prayer like that?
- 4) How can we "*keep ourselves in God's love*"? To what extent is it our responsibility to do that? Isn't it God's responsibility?
- 5) What do you understand by "*eternal life*"?
- 6) How do you motivate yourself in your faith?