

Growing in faith and love

20/6/20 dkm

Read: Romans 8:24-39, Jude

Text: Jude v 17-21

Psalms: 99:1-5&8-9, 51:10-19, 130, 116:7-16, 72

We are living in the last days with the day of the Lord fast approaching. My friend in India wrote of the many signs we are seeing that remind us of this truth. He wrote of the coronavirus pandemic striking the whole world, of locust plagues in Africa and India, of earthquakes in and around Delhi, and of cyclones. As I read his letter I heard of soldiers being killed in a fight with China. This friend writes, 'many are driven to fear as there is no hope'. In our own country we have people whose only hope or desire is to undo or tear up the past. Anything or anyone associated with past evils, like slavery, are being targeted for destruction and removal from history.

I took the opportunity to watch a movie about William Wilberforce called, 'Amazing Grace'. Slavery was not stopped by violent protest or revolution but by a man of God working within the democratic political system. I deliberately refer to a democratic political system because not all political systems are democratic. We must be thankful for our democracy and for true Christians like Wilberforce. We must pray and work to maintain our democracy, and above all engage in evangelism and pray for revival in the church.

Reminders of slavery might be torn down but what about reminders of sin? It is sin, the sin of economic greed that led to slavery and to many other evils that continue in our society. If we really want to get rid of racial discrimination, gender discrimination, or religious discrimination, not to mention the evils of abortion and euthanasia, we must go back further than the last three centuries. We must go back to the very beginning, to Adam and Eve and the entry of sin into human hearts. We can then move forward, not denying sin and its effects, but seeing how sin was conquered in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. All the evils of the world today can be conquered in and through the cross of Christ. In the kingdom which

he inaugurated there is no sin and hence no evil. Have you entered this kingdom? If you repent of your sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ you will receive the Holy Spirit, the mark of belonging to Christ and his kingdom.

I said 'inaugurated' because Christ's kingdom has not yet come in its fullness. The church is the body of Christ here on earth. Being on earth it is attacked by Satan and impacted by sin. The church will prevail because the Lord has assured us it will (Mat 16:18), but we in the church are called by God to be diligent in keeping the faith and building up the church, lest we find ourselves out of both. The church came under attack from the time it was established by the apostles of Jesus Christ. Judaizers followed the apostle Paul demanding all believers be circumcised in the flesh according to the Law of Moses, law that was fulfilled and superseded in the cross of Jesus Christ. Paul struggled to make known and understood the doctrines of grace, as did all the apostles. Sinful hearts are proud hearts, hearts which cling to at least an element of works in salvation. Proud hearts are selfish hearts, and selfishness leads to division. Selfish hearts are also sensual, focussed on the flesh rather than the spirit.

Jude helps us identify false teachers in the church on the basis of these characteristics. After reminding us of God's judgment of ungodly men and angels in the past, Jude turns towards believers in the church with teaching about how they must 'earnestly contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints' (v 3). He addresses them as 'Beloved' (v 17, 20). He firstly calls upon them to remember words spoken by the apostles, and secondly to keep on growing in the faith. His words are, of course, applicable for believers today, to us as we continue in this faith taught in the Bible and applied to our hearts by the Holy Spirit. We are not looking for new revelation or new teaching in the church today. The only new revelation we await is the second coming of Jesus, his coming in judgment upon this sick and sinful world.

1. Beloved, remember apostolic teaching

False teachers in the church do not defer to apostolic teaching but to teachers and scholars who are like them. They are more likely to quote a professor than a prophet or apostle. Jude urged fellow believers to ‘remember the words spoken before by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (v 17). Words are important. It is words that are recorded in the Bible. We must read and seek to understand the message being communicated through these words. It is not our task to guess at what the apostles might have meant, and certainly not to be critical of what they write. All Scripture is inspired by God—verbally inspired: ‘Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit’ (2Peter 1:21).

In particular Jude wants us to remember what the apostles said about false teachers in the church, that there would be mockers or scoffers in the last time (v 18). Who said this? The apostle Paul warned the church at Ephesus of ‘savage wolves... not sparing the flock’ (Acts 20:29), of ‘men speaking lies in hypocrisy... forbidding to marry’ and dictating what can and cannot be eaten (1Tim 4:1, 2Tim 3:1). The apostle Peter warned of ‘scoffers in the last days’ (2Peter 3:3). So do not be surprised when false teachers show up and start leading the congregation astray.

Knowing that false teachers may infiltrate the church, what can believers do? They must firstly identify such men or women. Jude gives us four markers to look for. Firstly, they are mockers or scoffers. They breeze into the church advocating change to make the gospel acceptable to modern men and women. ‘Society has changed and the church must change if it is to remain relevant’ they say. In doing this they will ridicule old teaching and old ways. While the church must always be examining itself and reforming, mockery and ridicule have no place in that reform, certainly not mockery of the word of God. My ears prick up when I hear someone speak of the prophets, of Moses or David, not knowing all that we do about Christ, and even more so when they speak of the apostles as not

knowing science or medicine; some say Jesus was not dead but in a coma when he was buried.

Secondly, these apostates, 'walk according to their own ungodly lusts' (v 18). Jude, like Peter, notes that false teachers live by the lusts of the flesh (2Peter 2:13-14). If they are not greedy for money, they are greedy for food or sex; they are sensual, as Jude says in verse 19. Sigmund Freud, the father of modern psychology, taught that human beings are ruled by the desires of the flesh or natural instincts. Many agree with him, including some teachers in the church. False teachers give no place for spiritual things, to matters of the soul. They show no concern for spiritual things because, as Jude says in his next point, they do not have the Spirit (v 19).

The Holy Spirit dwells in the heart of every true believer. The Holy Spirit touches our sinful hearts leading us to confess our sin and believe in Jesus. He then abides in our heart as our counsellor or comforter. 'If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ he does not belong to Christ' (Rom 8:9 NIV). This is not taught in many churches today, certainly not in those teaching a second baptism, and the importance of speaking in tongues. Members who speak in tongues and receive a second baptism often join a 'special group' in the church.

Jude's fourth marker of these men is that they cause divisions in the church (v 19). He does not specify the nature of these divisions, and it does not really matter because the teaching of the apostles is for unity in the church (Gal 3:28). False teachers divide in order to rule. They divide on the basis of ethnicity, of gender, or of age, just like politicians. They also divide on the basis of personalities; 'I am of Paul, or I am of Apollos, or I am of Cephas' (1Cor 1:12). Or they divide on the basis of 'special knowledge' like the Gnostics. Those with 'special knowledge' might cast the commands of Christ aside as they indulge the flesh, or they might become legalists, forbidding members to marry or eat certain foods (Col 2:16, 1Tim 4:3). Because

ungodly people continue to show up to teach in the church we must continue to check leaders, and even members, according to the criteria given here by Jude.

3. Beloved, keep on growing in the faith

Despite some Christian's view of themselves and their ministry, there is no gift or office in the church designated 'policeman of the faith'! While it is important to remember that ungodly men and women will infiltrate the church in these last days, and to know how to identify such people, Jude reminds us that we must also keep watch on our own lives. I once heard about a man who thought it his duty to reprimand people in the church whenever they stepped out of line. One day someone spoke to him about stepping out of line, and he left the church! If we keep a watch on our own life no one will have cause to correct us, not even the Lord.

Jude calls us to be building ourselves up or to growing in the faith (v 20). Policemen and soldiers have to keep fit if they are to apprehend enemies. They have to undergo strict training, increasing in knowledge and fitness; as believers we must do the same. We must keep spiritually fit if we are to defend ourselves against attacks of Satan. Satan may attack us personally, but he also attacks through false teachers in the church. Jude gives us a lesson of four points with regard to keeping fit in the faith. All of us are concerned about our diet and our physical fitness, but are we concerned about our spiritual diet and spiritual fitness?

From the day we are born again of the Spirit until the day we die, spiritual growth continues- or it should! 'Build yourselves up in your most holy faith' says Jude (v 20). In India many house have weldmesh rods sticking out the roof. One day I asked why the house was never finished. I was told that when the house is finished the owner will have to pay tax! No matter how long it is since you first believed, you are still growing as a believer- or should be!

‘Faith comes from God and is toward God’. Growth in faith involves growth in knowledge of the object of your faith, the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; all of whom are referred to by Jude in this passage. I hope no one of thinks they know all there is to know about God! Growth in the faith also means growth in conduct, such that we conform more and more to the likeness of Christ. Do not make your neighbour or fellow believer your measure- Christ is your measure. Spiritual growth means becoming more and more like Christ. Paul speaks of his desire ‘to know Him’, to know Jesus and ‘being conformed to his death’ (Phil 3:10). ‘I am not perfected’ he said, and nor are we. Is your greatest desire to know more of Christ and become like him, or is it to know more of this world and be like someone famous. Let us focus on growing up into Christ who is the head’, today and every day (Eph 4:15).

Secondly, we must pray in the Holy Spirit (v 20, Eph 6:18). Prayer is essential to Christian growth. ‘Read your Bible, pray every day’ is part of a chorus the children know. Ask them what the next line is! Praying in the Holy Spirit means praying according to the word and the will of God. By all means pray the Lord’s Prayer, but go on confessing specific sins and making specific requests. The Spirit helps us when we feel weak and find it difficult to pray (Rom 8:26). You do not need a human mediator but you do need a heavenly mediator, and you have one in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Thirdly, ‘keep yourselves in the love of God’ (v 21). The apostle John tells us that God is love. He tells us that we see God’s love in him sending his Son, Jesus Christ, to die for us (1John 4:10). Keeping ourselves means never forgetting that we owe our life, our eternal life, to Him. We have the sacrament to help us remember, so do not neglect this memorial meal. Keeping ourselves in the love of God means remembering that, ‘nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ our Lord’ (Rom 8:39).

Finally, we wait, with assurance, the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, knowing he will bring salvation and eternal life as his gift for all whom he has called, and kept, in the faith handed down to us in the Scriptures, to all who have endured to the end (v 21). He will reward you if you have 'contended earnestly for the faith once for all delivered to the saints' to the end.