Stowe April 25th Jude

 John 16: 5-16, 33

**Letter of Jude**

**Theme –‘God’s guard against destructive discipleship.’**

Jude, the third letter of your series on short epistles engages with a perennial problem for all organisations. Staying true to founding principles. Churches are not alone in being targets for unscrupulous power struggles and those who want to make them vehicles for their own ideas. Think of the Labour party. We had Militant tendency in the 1980s and then, more recently, Momentum. The destructive effect of those two movements is obvious today, yet their leaders would say that they were/ are true to the real ideals and others have moved away.

It is the same with the church. Every schismatic movement has claimed that it is the true church, and the orthodox others have either betrayed the truth or not understood it properly. From earliest days Christians have had to discern truth from falsehood and true servant leadership from self- serving power grabbers, or those seriously in error which might have come about for a variety of reasons from moral laxity (as in Jude) to ignorance and sheer devious malice. Since the earliest days of the church there have been, to quote our Lord, **wolves in sheep’s clothing seeking to lead the elect astray.**

So the letter of Jude addresses the problem of false teachers and destructive leadership. I won’t go into details of authorship etc. There is a very good short Wikipedia article which deals with all of that, and since you are reading this online I can assume that you can find it here:

[Epistle of Jude - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epistle_of_Jude)

The short letter has rather a lot in it, and it assumes that its readers are very familiar with the apostolic teaching, given orally, the then scriptural books ( remember, the New Testament as such had not been defined at that time!) and a number of other spiritual writings that were eventually not included in the Canon (that is the official list) of the Old Testament. You should not allow that to distract you from the spiritual and practical points that Jude is making.

A summary of the contents (from Wikipedia)which might help as you read or re-read it is as below:

I. Salutation (1–3)

II. Occasion for the Letter (3–4)
  A. The change of Subject (3)
  B. The Reason for the Change: The Presence of Godless Apostates (4)

III. Warning against the False Teachers (5–16)
  A. Historical Examples of the Judgement of Apostates (5–7)
    1. Unbelieving Israel (5)
    2. Angels who fell (6)
    3. Sodom and Gomorrah (7)
  B. Description of the Apostates of Jude's Day (8–16)
    1. Their slanderous speech deplored (8–10)
    2. Their character graphically portrayed (11–13)
    3. Their destruction prophesied (14–16)

IV. Exhortation to Believers (17–23)

V. Concluding Doxology (24–25)[26]

We do not know what motivated the false teachers, other than a desire to duck the moral demands of orthodox faith. This theme is not unfamiliar to us as the church yet again turns itself upside down and inside out over issues in Human Sexuality. It is often a perverted feature of charismatic leadership, for example: the 9 O’clock service in Sheffield about 40 years ago, or a little later the activities of the then Bishop of Gloucester and more recently the activities of a well-known conservative evangelical leader and sometime foundation governor of Stowe.

So the first lesson for us is that Charismatic leadership that departs from scriptural tradition must be suspect, with the important caveat that the church has to respond to the culture in which it finds itself in order to connect with it. I well remember watching the local strict Brethren from Radclive back in the 80s lining up along Barclays Bank on a Saturday morning, ‘proclaiming the gospel’ to the market goers and making absolutely no connection whatsoever with them. Apart from anything else they were far enough away from the people to ensure they could not be heard! On the other hand my former Bishop in Reading, now Archbishop of York, went out one Good Friday, or maybe it was Maundy Thursday, with others and cleaned shoes in central Reading, and most definitely connected with people, getting press attention as well. He didn’t wash feet, which was Jesus’ literal command, but he did the equivalent in the 21st century. Cultural relevance.

The second guard we have, which links with the first, is to know the scriptures and understand basic Christian teachings. That is something that the C of E has not been good at doing for its members. Jude takes his readers through some historical examples from Israel’s past with some decidedly 1st century rabbinic slants to their interpretation, and one quoting the now lost non canonical work *‘The Testament of Moses’*. If we know scripture reasonably well then we will know when something is not in accord with scriptural teaching. Faith is not supposed to be blind faith, we are to **love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul mind and strength.** The mind is included in that list and thinking carefully about what we are told is important, and not accepting that the ‘leader knows best’ .

The Gospel of John gives us the third guard or defence, the guiding of the Holy Spirit. **He will**  **guide you into all truth.**  The Lord knew that the future would bring situations that had not been previously encountered, new challenges, new knowledge etc. He could not possibly prepare the disciples for every eventuality; and as to leaving a comprehensive manual for every situation known and unknown in the future…

In our fast moving era we need the guidance of the Holy Spirit more and more. We need him to show us how to react to things undreamed of in the first century. We need Him to help us discern when we are being led astray and when a change of direction or emphasis is right to meet new situations, often in conjunction with prayerful application of scriptural principles and discussion with our fellow Christians. If there is a consensus around an idea put forward by a leader then it is less likely to be erroneous. In the first centuries of the church big decisions were taken collectively in council, the modern equivalents of which are PCCs and synods. They might slow down decision making but they are a good defence against bad ideas and manipulative leadership. Jesus placed his church into the hands of 12 disciples, not one new leader.

It is a feature of fallen humanity that strong willed, sometimes deluded sometimes evil, or both, people draw others to follow their lead, sometimes with disastrous results, as we see in secular terms in people like Hitler and Mao, or in spiritual terms various self-selected gurus or oddball leaders such *David Koresh* of the Branch Davidians and the Waco texas disaster, or *The Reverend Sun Myung Moon* of the so called unification church. The Church is run by humans and is not immune from such things. We need therefore to listen to the Holy Spirit, test the leadership against Scripture, tradition and the character of the Lord (servant leadership) and take decisions prayerfully and collectively.