



28 October 2018
Feast of St Simon and St Jude
Solemn Sung Eucharist
Ephesians 2 vv. 19–end
John 15 vv. 17–end

If the world hates you

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Matthew Shepard was an American student at the University of Wyoming. Twenty years ago, at the age of 21, he went out for a drink and at the end of the evening two men offered to give him a ride home. They did not take him home. Instead they drove him to a remote, rural area. They hit him on the head, continuously, with blunt weapons, tortured him and then tied him to a fence. They left him there in freezing temperatures. Matt was there for 18 hours in a coma until a cyclist saw him and thought he was a scarecrow. Getting closer he saw a young man with his face completely covered in blood except for where his tears had partially cleansed his cheeks.

Matt was taken to hospital. His injuries were too severe for him to be operated on. He lay on life support for six days until, at 1253am on October 12th 1998, he was pronounced dead.

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Matt Shepard was gay. His killers knew that. His killers didn't like that. Other people didn't like that. At Matt's funeral, his parents had to walk past members of the Westboro Baptist church holding placards that said 'Matt's in hell' and 'God hates fags'. His parents decided not to bury Matt's ashes anywhere because they believed that his grave would be defaced. They kept Matt's remains at home. Until Friday just gone.

On Friday, at Washington Cathedral, his ashes were carried in to a full cathedral. At a service full of lament and colour, sadness and resolve, Matt's remains were finally laid to rest in the cathedral. The preacher at the service was Bishop Gene Robinson, the first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal church, who recalled the day when five years after Matt's death he was consecrated as a bishop. He was in the vestry putting on a bullet proof vest as the FBI had told him he must because there had been too many death threats received, and as he was putting the vest on a note arrived from Matt's mother. 'I know Matt is smiling down on you today' it said. Bishop Gene kept it with him through the service. The vest had to remain on for several months.

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Today, one of the saints we celebrate is St Jude. We know very little about him. In fact all we really know is who he wasn't. He was "Judas not Iscariot" says the Gospel of John. Because his name continued to recall his traitor namesake, there was initially a resistance to invoking Jude's prayers. So he became "the saint of last resort". But eventually "the saint of last resort" became "the patron saint of lost causes" and in that capacity countless desperate people still turn to him seeking his intercession.



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Two days after Matt Shepard's final internment, and just after National Hate Crime Week, St Jude is a good saint to remember. He was the man known for what he wasn't. He was not Iscariot, defined by who he's not. Matt was known for not being straight and the list of people who know they are seen often for what they aren't is long – defined by not being white, not being clever, not being physically the same, not being British or sporty or Western, not quite fitting in, not being like the local majority. We label people as not being like us. They are other. This can then mean they are not really human as we are and so we can do anything we like to them. The violence can take many forms: from isolation, teasing, bullying to mental, spiritual and physical abuse, to leaving someone tied to a fence with their skull broken or nailed to two pieces of wood with thorns pushed into your face.

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The Gospel tells us today that we do not belong to a hating world. We belong to God. Jude may be known here for who he isn't but God knows Jude for who he is and God loves him like anything. You may sit here now knowing what others think of you because of what you aren't. But you sit here with God who knows exactly all you are and can yet be and loves you for it. Matt was an Anglican and wonderfully his church loved him and showed him that no matter whatever happens, no matter whatever anybody says or thinks, the love of God for him was certain and true and forever, even beyond death. At the end of his sermon the bishop, in tears, said he had three things to say to Matt in that cathedral: gently rest in peace here, you are safe now, welcome home.

The bishop then told the congregation that if they thought being there at the service was enough, they had misunderstood. They were there to be transformed by what had happened and to leave the place to make sure these things don't happen and that means working out how you will vote, what you need to challenge, what you need to support, who you need to look at again, who you need to be alongside and seeing, too, who you need to help you get through life, people who will remind you of the love of God for you. If you don't stand for something you might fall for anything. Don't fall, not us in here, with a belief in God-given dignity of all, for God's sake. Stand and stand up now for an end to this hate and for a love of people in all their whacky and wonderful difference, a love for people who need that love at the moment because there's too much hate of others who don't fit in with my world going on.

If the world hates you...I have chosen you out of the world

The police woman who was called out to the scene of Matt's attack says that as she approached the fence she saw something next to his body. It was a deer, lying quietly beside him. It looked like it had been there all night long. She said the deer saw her, stood up and looked in her right in the eyes and then ran away. 'That was the good Lord, no doubt, no doubt in my mind' she said in her report, 'that was the good Lord'.