

SERMON – ALL SAINTS DAY 2013

Daniel 7: 1-3, 15-18

Ps 149

Ephesians 1: 11-23

Luke 6: 20-31

In the name of God, who calls us to choose life. Amen.

Well, Happy All Saints' Day! Today we celebrate the saints – all of them.

There is not actually agreement on what constitutes a saint. The Roman Catholics take a fairly rigid, rules-based approach: a couple of miracles, a blameless life, and you may be in. It helps, of course, to be a former Pope.

Protestant churches have, on the whole, shunned the idea of there being special individuals who are saints and point to St Paul's very wide usage of the term. St Paul, in his letters to the young churches in the first century, calls all the early Christians 'saints'. He writes, for example, 'to the saints at Ephesus' and there is a tradition of regarding as saints all who are followers of Christ and all who die as Christians. On this reading, we are celebrating the church itself.

The Anglican Church, as we might expect, has taken a middle path, acknowledging some of the great heroes of the faith as saints but generally having a much shorter list than Roman Catholicism. In 1958, the Lambeth Conference (all the bishops from all over the world) adopted their own set of criteria, somewhat less onerous than those imposed by the Roman Catholic church, but containing the cautious phrase: 'In the choice of new names economy should be observed and controversial names should not be inserted until they can be seen in the perspective of history'.

There is also between the churches a difference of opinion on the role of saints, ranging from those who see them as intercessors for us before God to those who understand them as examples of godly living.

But in common language we tend to use the word 'saint' in this last way. We use the word to describe people who are shining examples of what it means to live as God wants us to live. Saints are people who have shaped their lives into godly shapes. This is expressed in

many different ways: 'they follow God's will', 'they have set aside their own desires and followed God's path', 'they have died to self'.

And so we celebrate the great saints of the faith: people like St Paul, who turned his life upside down and spent decades travelling to spread the gospel; St Peter, who left his fishing nets and ended his life as a martyr for the faith, crucified upside down, rather than dying peacefully in his own bed. St Clare of Assisi turned her back on wealth and status, taking vows of poverty and leading a life of prayer. And there is too, of course, the example of St Mary, mother of our Lord, who put her fate entirely into God's hands.

We also give thanks for our 'personal' saints – the people we have known who have been lights of godliness in our own lives. It could be a member of your family, someone you knew when you were growing up, a mentor, a friend. Someone like Mrs Adams down the street, who always had time for a geeky young girl in glasses; Pere Michel in Paris who got tired of always talking about God and loved a joke; a lecturer whose life shone with integrity and humility. You will have your own list and I encourage you to remember them in your hearts during our time of prayer. Without them, you would not have the understanding and faith you have today.

But All Saints Day is more than a celebration of the famous saints and our own personal ones. It is also, profoundly, an acknowledgement of the universal nature of the church. We are giving thanks, not just for the famous saints of the church, nor just for those who have significance within our lives, within the life of our community, but also for the saints of whom we have never heard – the saints who are, or have been, important to other Christians throughout the world. We are members of a body that is much larger than we can grasp. Despite all that the advertising industry and the media try to tell us, it is not all about us. We are part of a much greater story. The church has existed long before any of us were alive and will continue to exist long after we are gone. It has a geographical spread that encompasses the world: people have heard about Jesus and formed communities of faith everywhere. On All Saints' Day we celebrate all the saints of all the church, wherever and whenever, known to us and unknown.

So, if saints are people who are shining examples of what it means to live as God wants us to live, if they are our role models, what do their lives tell us about how we should be living?

Some years ago on a book stall, I came across a slim volume, winsomely titled 'How to Become a Saint: A Beginner's Guide'. Intrigued and sceptical, I pulled it out and had a look. The title had,

I will admit, set my teeth on edge. Surely sainthood is not something to aspire to. It is one of those things like humility or modesty – if you want it you've already lost it. And yet, surely we do aspire to live saintly lives even if we are not comfortable with the idea that someone might call us 'saints'. It is, after all, much easier to see other people as saints than to imagine that someone might see yourself as a role model in the godly living stakes.

Well, despite some cringe-worthy chapter headings, the author made a very astute point. He argued that becoming a saint has more to do with learning to trust God than with learning to be good, and he offers a spiritual discipline which encourages the follower to do just that – to put aside our own ideas about who and what we are and to trust the work of God in our being.

This is a very perceptive insight. Many of the great saints were not 'good' people, as we would normally think of 'good', but they were people who followed the call of God in their lives. St Paul was a fiery, impetuous, single-minded, abrasive man who had murdered Christians before his conversion. St Francis stole from his family. The list goes on. But they trusted God and, in so doing, they became who they were created to be. Paradoxically, surrender of self leads to true self. And true self is not a perfect, 'good' person, complete and rounded, it is someone who has a particular contribution to make to the life of the church. It is someone who is a member of the body of Christ.

Here spirituality and theology meet. The lived experience of surrender to God followed by discovery of true self is a living out of the doctrine that we are created in the image of God. We are shards of 'godness', but we are only whole when we are together as the body of Christ. No one of us contains the fullness of God in our being. We are only whole when we are in relationship with God and with each other. The saints point the way to this truth about ourselves and about the church.

And so let us give thanks for them, for their example of trust and true self-hood to the church across the centuries and all around the world. Let us celebrate all the saints! Amen.

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