

The Feast of All Saints
Isaiah 25:6-9; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44

So, why do we keep this day each year as a commemoration of all saints? Well, in the early years of the Church, martyrs – those who had made the ultimate sacrifice on account of their allegiance to Christ – were remembered on the anniversary of their death. The first three centuries were times of great persecution for Christians, and the number of martyrs increased dramatically during that time (as we are sadly witnessing once again around the world in our *own* day). The number of days left free in the calendar to remember these saints was rapidly decreasing, so in the fourth century it was decided that *one* day in the year would be set aside to commemorate *all* the saints who couldn't be fitted in to the calendar. The 'important' saints continued to have a day set aside for their remembrance, while the 'lesser' saints were remembered on All Saints Day.

Now if we were to ask folk today what they understand by 'all saints', they'll probably associate it with a clothing store of that name, or perhaps a girl band which rose to prominence in the 90s. In fact, most people don't realise that Halloween, which has sadly become increasingly paganised, was originally the eve of All Hallows / eve of All Saints Day. That's why many churches around the country aim to counteract the darkness which characterises popular thinking about Halloween, with services and events which emphasise the light which *Christ* brings to the world. I find it really quite dreadful to see shops around town draped in all sorts of frightening representations of witches and ghosts and the like, which might look like just a bit of fun on the surface, but which really have demonic and occult undertones. By contrast, the time of All Hallows is meant to point *away* from all this dark stuff to *Christ* who is the Light of the World; so, if you have any young children in your families who are influenced by the popular take on Halloween, please do gently help them to grasp what it's really meant to be all about.

Now when we think of 'saints', perhaps what might naturally come to mind are the endless statues of holy people from the Bible and from down the centuries which we find dotted around our churches. Or we may think of particular saints associated with specific things; I feel a particular affinity with Jude, one of the Lord's Apostles, who's often regarded as the patron saint of lost causes. When it comes to the more popular perceptions of what being a saint is all about, they tend to present it as something which is very '*distant*' from us. Saints are seen as ultra-holy individuals whom we should greatly admire and venerate, but who are very far removed from *us* mere mortals. And what's more, you have to be dead before you can become one!

The Bible readings set for today tend to focus on this *future* aspect to what sainthood is all about. In our Old Testament reading from Isaiah, the prophet's vision looks forward to a time when people drawn from all nations will be welcomed to God's banquet, and death will be swallowed up for ever. Then in the

reading from Revelation, we find portrayed there the ultimate fulfilment of Isaiah's vision – a New Creation in which God will dwell amongst his people; it's not simply wishful thinking, but in Christ has become a real and living hope, through his resurrection from the dead. And in the Gospel reading from John, Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead, is a sign pointing ultimately to the raising of the faithful departed at the end of time in Christ, who is the Resurrection and the Life.

Yet alongside this *future* aspect of sainthood, I believe that we mustn't lose sight of the fact that sainthood is something which is a lot closer to us than we think – it's something which has implications for us in the '*here & now*', as well as in the age to come. Remembering the saints who have gone before us reminds us *both* of our ultimate destiny, *and* our need for faithful Christian living in the present.

So, first of all, perhaps we need to remind ourselves of the fact that when we come together for worship,

we do so *in communion* with all the saints who have gone before us. We can often get so earth-bound in our understanding of worship that we can all too easily lose sight of *this* dimension to it. In fact, when we look at the words of the Communion Service that we use, we find plenty of references which remind us that when we worship, we do so with the saints in glory – “Therefore with angels and archangels and with *all the company of heaven*, we proclaim your great and glorious name.....”; “with all who stand before you *in earth and heaven*, we worship you, Father almighty, in songs of everlasting praise.....” etc We come to worship before the throne of God *in union* with the saints who have gone before us – in union with *all* God’s faithful people, living and departed.

Then secondly, the saints shouldn’t merely be seen as objects of our adoration, but rather they should serve as an inspiration and as an example to us in our *own* walk of faith. We have much to learn from the holy people we read of in the Bible and throughout the course of Christian history – people

who faced plenty of trials, temptations and difficulties in life, as we do – yet who through all of this, persevered in faith. And I’m sure we can all think of faithful believers now departed this life whom we have known *personally*, who have had a profound influence upon *us* in our own walk of faith. They too are part of that great cloud of witnesses.

And thirdly, it’s important to remind ourselves that when we look at the various references to ‘saints’ in the New Testament, we find that the term isn’t simply used to refer to Christians who have passed on from this life and are now in glory, but more often than not, it’s used to refer to believers who are still very much alive on earth – those who are seeking to follow the Lord in the midst of the trials and tribulations of *this* present age. And so, we’re reminded that if we are truly seeking to follow Christ, then we too are saints – we are God’s holy people, set apart to serve him in the midst of this world – set apart to live and work to *his* praise and glory. You don’t have to wait till you die and get canonised by a pope in order to be a saint. *True*

sainthood begins in the here and now. Mother Theresa was once asked what it felt like to be called a 'living saint'; "Possibly, people see Jesus in me", she replied, "But we can see Jesus in each other. Holiness is meant for *all* people."

Now this is perhaps the most difficult thing for us to accept – that *we* are called to be saints of God – his holy people – *now*. It's perhaps not really trendy to be holy. Besides which, recognising our call to be a saint may seem quite a 'tall order'. Apart from anything else, it probably means that we need to change the way we live our lives. Walking in the way of holiness involves us being open to the work of God's Holy Spirit in our lives, and allowing ourselves constantly to be transformed by *Him*. It involves living our lives according to *God's* word and *not* by the standards of the world. It's something which theologians call 'sanctification' – growing in holiness – becoming more like Jesus as we journey on each day. Because we are a people called to be different.

CS Lewis once wrote, "How little people know who think that holiness is dull. When one meets the real thing, it is irresistible." So how do *we* come to that place where holiness becomes irresistible to *us* and we accept our call to holiness? Well, it begins perhaps by discovering that even the greatest of saints was a real person. Like the saints of old, *we* have come through our ordeals in life, *we* struggle to keep the faith, *we* struggle against the indifference of the world, *we* have to endure pain and suffering. Being a saint doesn't mean that we're perfect. It does mean, though, that our Christian life is a journey *towards* holiness – we're a 'work in progress'. And we become part of a great community – the communion of saints – the fellowship of those from *every* age who have served Christ and faithfully witnessed to the truth of the Gospel.

So, the key emphasis in all this is on the need for us, as God's saints – his holy ones - to keep constantly focused upon things eternal. It might be nice to simply lie back and be content with all the nice

things in life, but this All Saints Sunday, we are challenged to look beyond these earthly concerns to that which lasts forever. It's about living here on earth – in our day-to-day lives in the present age - as citizens, and indeed ambassadors of *God's* eternal Kingdom. And as we do so, we look forward to the time when God's Kingdom will be established in all its fullness, when his saints will receive that Kingdom and possess it for ever.

So, like the saints who have gone before us, it must be *our* desire too, to deny ourselves, to take up our cross and to faithfully follow the Lord Jesus. It isn't an easy path to follow. But it's only by running with perseverance the race that is set before us, constantly looking to Jesus, that *we* will finally be able to share in the inheritance of the saints in glory. In the power of the Spirit, may we live as the saints *we* are called to be.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks this day for all who have gone before us who have served you faithfully, and especially for all those who have inspired us in our own walk of discipleship. Following their example, help us, by your Holy Spirit, to become more and more like Jesus each day, that we may be faithful citizens and ambassadors of your Kingdom here on earth. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.