

Sunday Sermon - 02.11.20

Delivered by Rev'd Shelley Knight

By a happy coincidence All Saints day falls on a Sunday this year. It's a day when we think about the high profile saints. St. Paul, St John or even St Francis. We at St Pauls celebrate the dual feast days of All Saints and All Souls noted in our Collect Prayer this morning it says "Give us grace so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living that we may come to those inexpressible joys you have prepared for those who truly love you." A fairly hard ideal to live up to I think. In our Church we don't put as a great importance on the Saints as others. This week at Villa, I had a lady show me her cross with a medal of St Benedict imbedded in and she told me that I could bless myself with it. I must admit I felt a little uncomfortable doing this.

I suspect that 99.99 % of the saints of the Church never made it to a Stained glass window or a Red Letter Saints day. Many of us have been inspired and encouraged by the great Saints. For me, Saint Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, is pretty special. He was a man, as legend has it who gave bags of gold to a destitute family whose three daughters would have starved or ended up in prostitution to survive. That empathy and compassion inspires me, much more than the jolly Coca Cola Santa Claus with presents for everyone that he has become.

St Francis is another saint who captures my imagination. His passion to embrace the poverty of the ordinary people and even to embrace the lepers who were expelled from villages and cities inspires me. His extraordinary capacity to see the whole of creation as a sister or brother leads me into a journey of deep consideration. His calmness and humility inspire me and I see many of those qualities reflected in the current Pope who took his name.

It is right to give thanks for the lives of the saints, their examples. However remembering the great deeds of the Saints also comes with an inherent trap for us. In our minds we can elevate the Saints to such giddy heights that we can forget that they were people just like you and I. We forget that they had their sins and failings. With the focused lens of time and history we can often choose to overlook their faults and flaws. Think of St Peter in tears on Holy Thursday, denying Christ 3 times. Think of St. Paul who presided over the stoning death of Stephen, or James and John who got their mum to ask for box office seats in heaven. So when you think of these great ones, remember also that they too were flawed human beings. The good news with these prominent saints is that they fessed up and knew that they were forgiven. They knew who they were. Selection criteria number one for being a saint is to know that you are a forgiven sinner.

Most certainly the 'great saints', you know the 'big' ones, were not the people we seem to put up on pedestals today. They led pretty ordinary lives and they just got on with it. They said their prayers, met for fellowship, supported and encouraged each other. They were very much like us not only in their murky bits, but also in their own tedious struggle of achieving faith. They were all very human, all with faults and moments of giftedness, just like us.

We can't, and shouldn't, just glance at these Saints for a moment in time and think that we get it. The Saints compel you to stare at them for a long time, marvelling at their strength and wondering if some of what they achieved is even possible in today's world. Their faith, strength and courage in persecution forces us to stretch the bounds of our understanding and reconsider what really is possible.

I wonder, if hearing Jesus speak that day on the mountain just outside of Jerusalem in the first century had a similar effect on people. In first century Palestine, everybody understood how the world worked. Might made right. They were living under the Roman Empire, after all. The Romans got to rule most of the known world because they had the biggest military, the most money, and were willing to do whatever it took to secure their power base. The amount of resources in the world was finite, so you did whatever you had to do to make sure you got as big a share as you could. Sounds a bit like some countries today. But here's this preacher, this nobody, from Nazareth telling an entirely different story.

Here's Jesus saying that things like meekness, being persecuted, and being merciful in a merciless world are actually blessings from God! This is Jesus' first recorded teaching in Matthew's gospel, and it sets the tone for his ministry as described in all four gospels. Jesus is forcing us to radically rethink the priorities and value systems around which we orient our lives. On the one hand there's the story told by the empire (the ruling powers of the world) that says that the material realities and the rules or laws of this life are the entirety of all creation, so material gain and success and living by the rules are the stick by which we measure individual worth. On the other hand, there's the story that Jesus is telling, which tells us there is a higher reality than what we can perceive with our five senses, and that this higher reality, and the priorities that flow out of its being, are to dictate how we live our lives in the world.

Jesus didn't just tell this story, he lived it out. He spent time with those who were considered outcasts by the world, and even by the religious system. He taught, ate with, and healed all people, regardless of where they fell in the societal class structure. Jesus forced the people of his day—and us as well—to consider a different story, a different understanding of what was really possible, and to consider that all they had ever known, or could know, might not be all there is.

This Sunday, we are celebrating All Saints, where we remember those who have passed from this life, who have chosen to orient their lives around the story of Jesus, as opposed to the stories offered in this world. The passage from Revelation makes a rare appearance in the lectionary cycle, and in it we find that those who get special recognition in the Kingdom are those who have chosen to orient their lives around the story of Jesus, and as a consequence have “come out of the great ordeal,” paying a heavy price for living by a different story than the rulers of the world.

Texts like this are often used to condemn those outside of the Christian faith and reinforce the desire to feel superior to others, saying “they'll get theirs in the end!” While Revelation of St John was written to people experiencing heavy persecution, and they undoubtedly felt comforted by the promise of future public justification, John is not trying to say that one group will end up being favoured over another. That's just a Christianised version of the world's story. Instead, this text is trying to give comfort to those who have become so weary from walking this difficult road that Jesus calls us to. The example of the countless saints over the years who have chosen the story of Jesus over the story of the world, and ultimately have left the world a much better place than they found it, have shown us that the more difficult road, the one with the delayed rewards, is ultimately the better one. It is right and proper to remember those humble saints and to give thanks for them.

Not so easy for us though. How do we “follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living that we may come to those inexpressible joys” as our Collect prayer calls us to do? How can we even try to live our modern lives in a 'saintly manner'? Here's a few little starting points -

In the beatitudes, holiness is equated with being poor in spirit, it is about being meek, it is those who mourn. A saint is someone who hungers for righteousness, who is merciful, and clean of heart. There is no mention of "blessed are the rule-makers, the obedient, the self-righteous or the judgmental". Jesus was about reaching people in their hearts, giving those reasons for hope and joy. This is the work of a saint; this is also how we should try to live our lives. It is a trap to think only of the important saints as only those who lived lives which were humble and exemplary, and it is easy to remember those humble saints and to give thanks for them, but we can think that they were so whizz bang and fantastic there is no hope at all for us. They were just so amazing and if that is the criteria for getting through the pearly gates, then we might as well just give up now, pull the doona over our head and wait for our inevitable downfall. The good news is that this is not what God wants for us. We are to be inspired by the saints and we are encouraged by joining in the worship of heaven with them whenever we get to the altar. You know how it goes ... "Therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven..." When we gather at the Eucharist, we're not just approaching God with the saints who passed on, we're also approaching God together, in unity with all the saints among us in the church today. Unity in Christ is how we change the world. But, like all spiritual blessings, there is a significant challenge: Relationships are messy. They get strained; they go through difficult times; they tempt us to give up on our faith community.

It is important to remember all the 'little saints' of today, the everyday saints, the people from every walk of life. Those uncomplicated, everyday people through whom many of us have come to understand God in a different light. They may have been our parents, or a Sunday School teacher, an RE teacher or a very ordinary person lived and spoke of the faith and the trial and troubles they have managed to live through. These people never had any miracles that anyone was aware of. They are like the bread and wine of the Eucharist. They bring God into the lives of others and like the bread and wine, they are sustenance of everyday life. These are the people deep within our community who bring God into our lives. These are the little saints, the everyday saints, and they are people just like you and I and that is today's very good news.

A saint is like a window. A sacred window that allows others to see the beauty and wonder and splendour of God. And yep, sometimes the window gets grimy just from lack of attention and scrubbing. Sometimes stuff falls upon it from an unknown source and a great height. That stuff needs cleaning off but underneath it is still a window. It is the person or place that we look to that can be relied upon to show us the face of God, even if the window is a bit grubby sometimes and we have to squint a bit harder. We can overcome divisions when we embrace one another in love.

So let's give thanks especially for the little saints, the ones who go unnoticed. Many of you may easily be counted among the little saints, and for sure you know others who are quietly, inauspiciously holy. And if we consider ourselves unfit to be counted among the little saints let's make our prayer this week that God's Spirit of grace might continue the work of transforming us into saints, albeit, little saints.

My invitation to you this week, as we celebrate All Saints and All Souls, is that we hear the breadth, depth, height and width of God's amazing grace and love, which includes all the wonderful saints, including the little saints who are often overlooked, we are invited this week be immersed in God's grace where we may even discover for ourselves the undeserved love and forgiveness of God.

When you come forward and extend your open hands for the bread, let your prayer be: "God, may I remember who I am in Christ, may I remember those who were before me, and may I embrace those around me as Christ."