

## Year C All Saints Day

Who here this morning thinks they're a saint? Don't be shy, feel free to put your hand up! When did you last meet a saint? What does a saint look like? How often do we think of ourselves as saints, especially of when we think how unsaintlike our behaviour has been perhaps even as recently as earlier this morning?

All I can say to those who didn't put their hands up, either you are exceptionally modest or unbiblical. In his collection of essays, *The Weight of Glory*, CS Lewis challenges us to see our ourselves and our neighbours as Jesus sees us. He says, 'there are no ordinary people, you have never talked to a mere mortal'.

Nadia Bolz Weber, the American Lutheran priest and writer, puts it like this. It has been my experience that what makes us the saints of God is not our ability to be saintly but rather God's ability to work through sinners. What we celebrate in the saints is not their piety or perfection but the fact that we believe in a God who gets redemptive and holy things done in this world through, of all things, human beings, all of whom are flawed

That is why every year we celebrate **ALL** Saints Day, although strictly speaking a couple of days early this year. We tend to think of it as celebrating all those wonderful Christians who went before us, remembering and honouring those who have died, especially those who we have lost in the past 12 months. But no, we are all saints, however we see ourselves and regardless of our status.

They say every day is a school day and here's my offering for today. Whoever can tell me the link between the Beltane Festival in Peebles and Halloween goes straight to the top of the class.

Beltane is the Gaelic May Day Festival, midway between the spring equinox and the summer solstice, the direct equivalent of tomorrow, which is midway between the autumn equinox and the winter solstice. Halloween has its roots in the Celtic pagan festival Samhain (Sowen) and, like Beltane and the two other major quarterly fire festivals, was regarded as a time when the barriers between the physical and spiritual worlds broke down. What today might be known as a thin place

Like many pagan festivals, Samhain, which starts at sunset tomorrow and goes on for 24 hours, and which is regarded by witches as the start of their New Year, was appropriated by the Christian Church for its own purposes. In the 9<sup>th</sup> century Pope Gregory decided that All Saints Day, which commemorates all those saints who don't have their own dedicated day, should be celebrated on November 1 rather than in May, with All Souls Day being marked on November 2. So, the service on October 31 was known as All Hallows Mass and the day became known as All Hallows Eve, hence Halloween.

So, what are All Saints Day and indeed All Souls Day about? In a world that can treat death almost casually, they invite us to linger in remembrance, grief, gratitude, and hope. They invite us to affirm the value of every single life and to honour how God's family is deeply interconnected across time, culture, history, and eternity.

As I have just said, we are all saints, and the reason is that we are all followers of Jesus, which is all the word really means when you look at its root. Here in St James and St Mungo's, we have lost seven beloved saints in this past year. And over the past few years we have lost many more and we remember them too with fondness and gratitude.

As the wisdom book Ecclesiasticus reminds us  
But of others there is no memory; they have perished as though they had never existed; they have become as though they had never been born, they and their children after them. But these also were godly people, whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten. Which is perhaps why the righteous deeds of the saints unknown to us have inspired many disciples in every generation, and why we must be thankful for their lives and their deeds, even if we might wonder how St Isidore of Seville, who died almost 1500 years ago, has become patron saint of the Internet.

Our Gospel reading this morning, taken from St Luke's Sermon on the Plain can make for uncomfortable reading, especially in the context of our own political situation. Like Rishi Sunak, Jesus has just chosen the equivalent of his cabinet. One of the most important Lukan narrative themes is levelling up, which is why unlike the Sermon on the Mount this address takes place on the plain and not on a mountainside – and Jesus warns of difficult times ahead.

Of course, a key difference is that in Jesus' worldview sainthood seems to belong first and foremost to the poor, the disadvantaged, the discriminated against, the have-nots of this world because they're the ones Jesus calls blessed, whereas in our world they are going to find the next few years particularly tough.

The reality is that compared to the majority of people in the world we don't fall into the category in terms of being have-nots. The watchword for us is woe. But Jesus isn't saying that all we can look forward to is troubles galore. No, more likely Jesus is saying watch out, don't be complacent. Life won't necessarily be a bed of roses all the time, however wealthy we are, however secure we feel.

Blessings and woes are not necessarily a harbinger of future rewards and punishments. Perhaps, rather, our security, our wealth, our food, our status, the worldly things we put our trust in, are actually rather illusory rather than the advantage we think they are. The benefits we get from putting our primary trust in Jesus outweigh anything the world can offer

We shouldn't deny that it's hard teaching, but that doesn't mean we should wallow in guilt at our good fortune. In the first part of this passage Jesus doesn't tell us how to behave, he's not even being judgemental, he's more telling us how the world works. We can move from woe to blessing to woe and back to blessing again during the course of our lives.

What Jesus seems to be saying is that we invite blessing when we are dependent on him and invite woe when we bask in smug self-satisfaction that we have got everything sorted. To put it another way we can all move from saint to sinner and back again, we are all on the same level, on the same plain.

One reason why the poor and the disadvantaged are blessed, are saints is perhaps because they know that God is their only hope, whereas our problem is that we forget that our sense of needing to talk to God daily is dulled, is in danger of becoming an afterthought. Rather like the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, we have already had our consolation.

How can we help remind ourselves that God needs to be our starting place and our ending place, when life itself for many people conspires against that taking root in our hearts and minds?

Well, one part of the answer lies in recognising what Paul tells the Ephesians in our reading. By raising Christ from the dead, God has given us everything we need for living a Christian life. We don't need anything else; we shouldn't wait for some ship to come in to make our lives different and better. The ship has already berthed.

Perhaps another part of the answer lies in Jesus' exhortation to love our enemies. Who are our enemies? In the broadest sense they are everyone we exclude from our lives, the ones we think have nothing to teach us, the ones we think we're superior to, indeed the ones we think we're inferior to. As Jesus says, don't expect to get a pat on the back for loving the lovable, don't expect a medal for only helping those who help you.

The golden rule of all the major world religions of do unto others as you would have them do to you is crucial to our development as disciples. As Eugene Peterson says in *The Message* in his translation of this passage Don't give for what you can get out of it.

The command to love our enemies points to the upsidedownness of Jesus' kingdom. As Frederick Buechner once put it, the world says follow the wisest course and be a success. Jesus says follow me and be crucified. The world says law and order, Jesus says love. The world says get, Jesus says give.

From that starting point, no wonder Jesus says the poor and the expendable are blessed. So, we should heed CS Lewis' comment that none of us is a mere mortal. We are all living saints, as Paul tells us at the start of his first letter to the Corinthians even as he prepares to castigate them for a whole category of moral offences.

None of the saints of the past, nor us, nor the saints of the future can pretend perfection, but equally we shouldn't forget that sometimes they got it right as God worked in and through them, and that is equally true for us. It is by the grace of the Holy Spirit working in us that we are made saints.

The Eucharist, as Pope Francis put it, is not a prize for the perfect. Rather it symbolises a truth about the whole of creation – that we are one, we are equal in dignity, we all eat of the same divine food, and Jesus still and always “eats with sinners,” just as he did when on Earth.

As saints, as followers of Jesus, we of course give thanks for all the saints who have gone before us and for those who will come after us. But perhaps what All Saints reminds us above all is that there is nothing so dark, so fearful or even so final as death that Jesus cannot reach in, call us out and bring life.