

Sermon All Saints Day 2020

Saint Paul in his letter to the Philippians, most likely writing in prison and awaiting his own immanent death, urges this small church to, *do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world.* It's a usual form of Pauline encouragement: hold fast and keep the faith. But it is, if we dare say, a rare moment of poetic expression: *shine like stars in the world.* A well-known hymn, frequently sung for the great feast we celebrate today, and best known from its hymn tune entitled, appropriately enough, 'All Saints' opens, *'Who are these like stars appearing, these before God's throne who stand? Each a golden crown is wearing; who are all this glorious band? Alleluia! Hark, they sing, praising loud their heav'nly King.*

The church's celebration of this feast of All the Saints places before the faithful the memory of God's luminaries, those whose lives of heroic virtue have shone *like stars in the world.* Paul, in urging the believers of the Philippian church to *shine like stars* is of course expecting *all* the members of that church to do so. He does not envisage a special, sacred 'elite' to fulfil this charge. From elsewhere in the New Testament corpus the faithful are frequently addressed as 'saints', that is, 'holy ones'. This is not an innovation of Paul. It does not even originate with Our Lord. The idea of a holy people for the holy God goes right back into the Old Testament. Four times the ancient author of Leviticus exhorts the people of Israel, *'be thou holy for I, the Lord, am holy.'* And so here rests the usual protestant aversion to saints and saints' days, and to this day. *All* followers of the Lord Christ are to be marked by the spirit of holiness. All of us who bear his Name are to *shine like stars in the world.*

Except that few of us actually do. The New Testament certainly bears witness to a certain kind of idealism. The memory of the Lord Christ was fresh. Those who knew him, or the apostles, are those who wrote the New Testament. And so, we should expect a certain fervour in their expectations. But as the generations passed, and the reach of the gospel spread further and further, and as numbers grew, so did an awareness that actually living the Christ life, bearing his image in our very lives, shining like stars in the world, doesn't come all that naturally or easily. In all honesty, few from the many who confess Christ as Lord actually come near to life he calls us to and the light he calls us to be.

But there were exceptions. There have always been exceptions which have shone brightly against the mediocrity, half-hearted commitment, compromise, and faulty witness of most of us. They stand brilliant against the dull background most of us, in truth, provide. This brilliance was first recognised and celebrated in those who gave *ultimate* 'witness': the martyrs. They reminded the infant church - just as we need reminding - that heroic virtue, fervent faith and courageous witness is possible! The saints and martyrs show that we can, by co-operating with sanctifying grace, be formed into Christ-likeness! The New Man, that Paul again speaks of, we can indeed possess! Saint Bernard tells the 'light of the Lord's face is signed upon the saints.' Christ's life was not just some impossible ideal but a truth that could hold in ordinary believers.

That's why their veneration. That's why they are held before us. To show us, and indeed encourage us, to live the Christ life, to take seriously. To show that you - *you* - can live that life. Again, the protestant objection to saints and saints days and this day, is that the saints *detract* from Christ. But this assertion is perhaps nothing more than an over-enthusiastic confidence in the capacity of a fallen humanity to reach the heights of sanctity. And this assertion could not be further from the truth! The saints do not detract from Christ! They help illumine the path to him! Saint Bernard, again, says, 'some knowledge of the saints' reward will make us more zealous in following their steps; it will inspire us with a keener longing for their fellowship; it will dispose us also more eagerly to seek their patronage.'

Do we not need encouragement? Do we not need to see how the gospel has taken shape and been lived in its fullness in every generation amongst every people? Do we not need to be urged on to be faithful? Because that is what the saints are doing. Calling us, *with* Christ, to come join them in the endless song before the throne of God. This is what Bernard means when he says that thinking on the saints 'will inspire us with a keener longing for their fellowship.' Looking at the saints is meant to stir within us the thought, that yes, I want to be with them. I want to share their joy. And encouraged that this is not impossible. It is not beyond us. Because to look at the saints is to see the vast family of God, among which we *are* numbered. To look at the saints means we see people like you and me, ordinary people. People like us who have simply *been captivated by the truth of Christ*. The rich and varied catalogue of saints this feast day calls to mind reminds us of this. They come from all walks of life.

Young, old, rich and poor, consecrated religious, priests and even bishops, hermits, parents, children, kings, adventurers, missionaries and simple workers. *People of every nation, race, tribe and language.* Shining like stars in the world. Amidst the encircling gloom, even the 'crooked and perverse generation Paul speaks of, the saints ask us *will you join them? Will you join them in being luminaries? Will you join them in casting light into a dark world? Will you allow Christ to captivate you?*

The Gospel set for this day gives a starting point of how we might respond to that invitation, to that call. It is the gospel heard by Christians on this feast for centuries, possibly more than a thousand years. We know it well: the Beatitudes. It is, if you like, the summary statement of what the Christ-life looks like, of how we might identify the New Man. But the Christ-life is only possible by accepting the mystery at the heart of our faith: the Cross. And accepting it not just intellectually, not just with the mind or even the heart. But allowing the mystery of the Cross to shape our very lives.

The Cross at once the instrument of shame, defeat, and death but in Christ the sign of life, hope and victory. Christ crucified is for some foolishness and others a stumbling block, but for those who are called, *Christ is the power of God and wisdom of God.* The Cross *reverses* all the usual ordering of things. The beatitudes, then, is *the Cross en-fleshed.* And this is what we see in the saints! The saints are tangible expressions of the beatitudes. Their lives shine so brightly precisely because they live this inversion. The saints, who *poor in spirit*, like Francis, forsake wealth and status for the life of heaven; *those that mourn* like Monica who wins the conversion of her son Augustine with her tears; *the meek* like Elizabeth of Hungary and King St Louis of France, for whom the heavenly crown is more desirable than an earthly one; *those who hunger and thirst for righteousness*, like Thomas More speaking truth to power; *the merciful* like Stephen who prayed for his murderers; *the pure in heart* like Agnes, Lucy, Cecilia and the virgin martyrs; *the peace makers*, like Barnabas, and Catherine of Siena; and all *those persecuted for righteousness sake*, the countless martyrs, who even still, are so completely captivated by Christ they bear ultimate witness.

'Who are these like stars appearing, these before God's throne who stand? Luminaries who shine like stars in the world because they have en-fleshed the mystery of the Cross. Given us by God to encourage us, urging us to greater faithfulness. And if we get to know them, if we become familiar with them, if we allow them to become part of our lives, then we will want to be with them, so that their joy will be ours. Amen.