

All Saints 2024 (All Saints East St Kilda)

In one parish I had a regular visitor who lived on the street. He would come for help. We would feed him and listen to him. He claimed to have come from “Womfaggie, Farver”. He most often came with a tract, a picture, or a booklet about a particular saint or a rosary. In each case these had been removed from the tract case of the local Roman Catholic Church.

If they were worth anything they were easy enough to return to the RC Church leaving my visitor relaxed because he had not asked for anything for nothing. Leaving aside the morality issues, the tracts and booklets were generally pretty awful. Treating saints as superhuman heroes, ‘Heroes of Faith’.

And regardless of the specific saint in question, the essential story always seemed to be the same—and it had a subtext, which was to persuade children and unthinking adults that basically God **just** wanted them to be very well behaved.

The pattern to these stories was that each saint was, as a child, dutiful, kind and patient, and utterly selfless; he or she never lost their temper; they always went out of their way to help other people, and they spent all their time praying. When they grew up, they gave up all worldly things and lived a life of exemplary goodness, piety, and wisdom, in the service of the poor. When they died people reported miracles.

The fact is that the Communion of Saints has nothing in common with the cult of hero-worship. We put heroes on pedestals and when we find

their human frailties and weaknesses, we become cynical and feel let down. "We have seen through them."

I am sure that the stories worked for some people but as models for Christian sainthood, it is not helpful to most of us. The saints of the Bible were not like that at all. For the most part they were not squeaky-clean, pious, compliant, and good.

We have the leader of the Apostolic band, St Peter, who was an obviously flawed human being, a man who always acts before he thinks, who has boundless enthusiasm but little understanding, and whose courage and loyalty to Jesus fail utterly and terribly at the very moment that they are put to the test. And, as we recently heard, James and John were fought for places of honour. The first followers of Jesus were ordinary working men and women, many of them vulnerable, lost and broken, and all of them sharing the deep and all-too-recognisable failings that we all share as human beings.

I would not disagree for a moment that saints as we honour them today and in the very name of this church are exceptional people who stand out from the crowd—but that is not because they lack our normal human flaws and frailties.

While I am not making him a saint, it was Oscar Wilde who wrote in: *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* "How else but through a broken heart can Lord Christ enter in?" There is a real truth there. Unless we recognise *our own brokenness*, we cannot recognise our need of God's forgiveness and grace.

So, what is it that truly characterises a saint? Is it the saying that saints are like stained glass windows—because the light of God shines through them bringing illumination and colour into the lives of those around them. I have always liked that image but in preparation for today it became clear to me that every window—even those that are broken—has the power to communicate light. Indeed, the simpler and more transparent the window, the more the light will be able to shine through.

In my own experience, there is in fact a two-way process here, just as you can see through both sides of a window. Because those whose lives communicate the light of Christ most effectively, simply through being who they are, are often those who are also most attuned to the problems and pains of the world around them. They are like clear windows and see, and feel, things with unusual clarity, as well as being bearers of light.

There is a novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*, by Sue Monk Kidd, published in 2001. It is a story about three sisters who keep bees, one of whom is a vulnerable woman called May, who feels the pain of the world so intensely that she is disabled by it. Perhaps somewhere within all of that there is also something of the essence of sainthood.

After all, the word '*compassion*' means literally '*suffering with*'; feeling the pain of another and responding to it. Therefore, it goes without saying that a compassionate heart cannot avoid being profoundly affected by the suffering of our world, and of the people around us.

The people whom I have known during the course of my ministry whom I would think of as saints, were not necessarily those whose faith was rock solid; or who were strong and capable and in control of life. On

the contrary—most of them had a certain brokenness and vulnerability and were unusually aware of their own failings. But they were also clearly people of compassion who saw the pain and suffering in the eyes of those around them, and who felt that pain. And, in the process, they opened my eyes, and those of others, and jolted us into recognising that we, too, should be responding. And they would laugh at the idea that I am talking about them in a discussion about the true nature of saintliness.

Saints are not superhuman, nor are they exemplary models of piety and prayer. Rather they are those who, like our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, do not shut out the pain of the world, but take it to themselves and bear it, while the light and peace of Christ is clear to see.

Those are the people in whose name this church stands.

And thanks be to God for that.