

Sermon Feast of All Saints 2017

There aren't too many advantages to Facebook. In the last little while, however, my own Facebook account has been telling me, *your memories are important to us*, and reminding me where I was exactly two years ago. And that's been quite nice really – to reminisce how two years ago I was in Paris, London and Walsingham. In many ways you could track my travel itinerary by following the churches I visited: Notre Dame, Saint Gervais, Sacré Coeur and Chartres Cathedral all in France. The Shrine of our Lady of Walsingham, Kings College Chapel, Cambridge, Saint Paul's Cathedral, Westminster Cathedral, Westminster Abbey in England and Canterbury Cathedral. Of course, so many of these holy sites have connections to the heroes of our faith: the heroes we celebrate on this great feast day, the feast of All the Saints.

Visiting Westminster Abbey, you can sometimes wonder if it really is a church. Sometimes it seems like just another tourist attraction, a kind of pious museum. You have to pay an awful lot to get in, there are hordes and hordes of people, and lots of impressive monuments to the great and worthy of our past. But it is a church. Prayer is said daily there. And in fact it is a pilgrimage church. The tomb of Saint Edward the confessor still lay at the heart of the abbey. Though it was stripped of its jewels and gold and ornate decorations at the time of the Reformation it remains an impressive reminder of what was once the spiritual heart of England. Edward the Confessor a model not only of kingly virtue but also an example of piety for all Christian faithful.

Who are these saints that we continue to remember them? Who are these saints that they continue to inspire us? Why this celebration today in honour of all the saints? The first reading today from Revelation tells us of a *'huge number, impossible to count'* who stand before the throne of the Lamb, dressed in white and carrying palm branches. This multitude of course includes all the officially recognized Saints, but also all the baptized of every age and nation who have sought to carry out God's will faithfully and lovingly. We don't know the faces and even the names of many of them, but they are the friends of God from every age and every place. Those who have shown us this high and holy way are not just a handful.

They are not *peculiar* to a particular time or place. Rather, *"a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues"*. We look to that vision of hope and glory and we see the church at its most triumphant, its most glorious, its most hopeful. To set our sights on that wonderful vision should remind us of the tremendous good and purity and holiness and truth that God has graced his church with. It should inspire us to that *same* goodness and purity and holiness and truth. If it was possible for them, then perhaps it is possible for us as well.

We need to keep holding up to ourselves this vision of hope because we know all too well that at the same time the church is also capable of much that is not good or pure or holy or true. We know the church contains within itself certain contentions and rebellious children. But even as we recognize that, we recognise that in the saints we find the church not only as it should be, but as

it *truly* is. The saints show us not only the best of what we can be, but also what we actually are.

The 12th century Saint Bernard in a sermon for this feast day asks, but "*why should our praise and glorification, or even the celebration of this Solemnity, mean anything to the Saints?*" And Bernard offers his own response: "*The Saints*", he says, "*have no need of honour from us; neither does our devotion add the slightest thing to what is theirs.... But I tell you, when I think of them, I feel myself inflamed by a tremendous yearning.*" This, then, is the meaning of today's celebration: looking at the example of the Saints ought awaken within us the great longing to be like them; happy to live near God, in his light, in the great family of God's friends. Being a Saint means living close to God, to live in his family. And this is the vocation of us all.

I suspect most of us imagine sanctity - holiness - as being the business of other people, other Christians. And we're Anglican after all, so we don't want to take this church thing, this faith thing too seriously... No enthusiasm here please, Father!! However, the business of personal holiness is clearly what much of the New Testament is directed toward. John reminds us in the second reading today, that if we want to see God, to know God, then we must purify ourselves, that we *must try to be as pure as Christ*.

The quest for holiness, for sanctity, is for all of us. To be a saint – to be a holy one – doesn't require extraordinary works or the possession of exceptional gifts. But it is necessary, first of all, to listen to Jesus and to follow him without losing heart when faced by difficulties. The Church's experience shows that every form of holiness, even if it follows different paths, always passes through the Way of the Cross, the way of self-denial. The biographies of the saints describe men and women who sometimes faced unspeakable trials and suffering, persecution and martyrdom yet persevered in their commitment. Holiness demands a constant effort, but it is possible for everyone because, rather than a human effort, it is first and foremost a gift of God. Everything in our lives is a gift of his love.

When we truly discover and believe that God gives his entire self to us in love, we are prompted in turn to love each other. Loving always entails an act of self-denial, "losing ourselves", and it is precisely this that makes us happy. And it is this happiness - the life of blessed-ness - that we hear of course outlined for us in the Gospel. Jesus says: Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed those who mourn, the meek; blessed those who hunger and thirst for justice, the merciful; blessed are the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted for the sake of justice. Actually, the blessed *par excellence* is only Jesus. He is, in fact, the true poor in spirit, the one afflicted, the meek one, the one hungering and thirsting for justice, the merciful, the pure of heart, the peacemaker. He is the one persecuted for the sake of justice.

But to the extent that we accept his proposal and set out to follow him - each one of us in our own way - we too can participate in his blessedness. With him, the impossible becomes possible. With him the sinner becomes the saint. With his help - and only with his help - we can become perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect. It's an invitation not just for someone else, but for

us. It's not a life just for other Christians, but for all Christians. The life of faith is not as passive spectators, like the countless tourists trekking through Westminster Abbey. Perhaps the great tragedy of Christian life is that so few of us open ourselves to accept the gift God offers. Few of us trust enough that God could actually change us. But with *his* help, the call to sanctity, to holiness, to blessedness can be ours. Let us dare to accept his gift. Amen.