

**All Saints Patronal Festival 2019: sermon preached at All Saints' church Nottingham by Rev Christopher Harrison, 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2019**

Last Friday was All Saints' Day, and today, therefore, we celebrate our Patronal Festival. This is a day for remembering all Christian people who have lived holy lives, not just the official and named saints of the Christian calendar, but ordinary Christians too. It's a kind of democratising of sainthood. But who, I wonder qualifies? What is involved in leading a holy life?

- Holiness isn't just about being a professional religious person, somehow set apart from the mass of humanity. In the New Testament, the same word was used for 'holy' as 'saint' – and indeed quite often was a word used to describe Christians in general.
- The Greek word in question was – and indeed still is - 'Hagios', which means 'separated from sin', and therefore consecrated to God. This has been achieved for us by Christ, which is consistent with the use of 'Hagios' in scripture to describe the first Christians. In the same way, even though we are still human, and therefore prone to sin, we have been given a way back to God by Jesus, and our lives are to be lived suffused with God's love, which draws us closer to what he desires of us.
- In the Hebrew of the Old Testament the word for 'holy' has a similar meaning: 'Qadosh' – set apart; set apart from the world, to be God's servants. So the ancient nation of Israel was 'Qadosh' – set apart from the rest of the world in order to serve God better.

All these ways of understanding holiness describe how we as Christians are to respond to God's love for us and to the salvation offered to us by the life, death and resurrection of Christ. God has shown us a way – through the example set to us by Jesus – to make us, as Christians, distinct and separate from the world in general. As St John puts it in his first epistle, we are to be 'in the world but not of the world'. God has shown us a way to holiness which is not necessary instinctive, but something we have to learn from Jesus. But this invitation to a life under the Lordship of Jesus is something to which we have to respond; by seeking to follow his example of love and service, by learning how to forgive seventy times seven times, by learning how to want the best for our enemy as well as for our friend – and by learning what is often the hard path of the beatitudes, those sayings about blessedness which are to do largely with spiritual discipline and personal sacrifice. In this morning's gospel – and the parallel, fuller version in the gospel of St Matthew – we read:

- '*Blessed are you who are poor; the kingdom of God is yours ...*' Jesus is not saying that poverty is good for its own sake, but is commending a life which is not overly preoccupied by getting and spending, amassing of possessions, selfish acquisition of things in order to try to make oneself somehow better than others.

- '*Blessed are you who are hungry; you shall have your fill ...*' Again, Jesus is not saying that it a good thing that some people in the world don't have enough to eat, but saying don't be greedy; don't see your appetite

for food as well or for other material things as being the purpose of life; learn the benefits of fasting and know how to put a limit on the food and other things we consume.

- *'Blessed are you who are weeping now; you shall laugh ...'* Through sadness and sorrow we can see and experience more deeply the love and care of God, who will comfort us in our grief and pain if we will look to him for help.

- *'Blessed are you when people hate you, drive you out, abuse you, denounce your name as criminal, on account of the Son of Man'*. Jesus is giving encouragement to those of his followers who will suffer persecution on his behalf in words which would become sources of strength to Christians through the centuries who have been opposed, mocked, punished and ostracised for their faith.

At the heart of these teachings lies Jesus' message that those who have everything in this world will learn that such things are not lasting treasures ... at death we lose all the material things we have possessed and can take none of them with us ... more important is how we have led lives in accordance with the teachings of Christ and responded to his call to us to show love, mercy, forgiveness and compassion to those around us and to work for a society in which all people are treated as God would want them to be treated ... and that even suffering for the sake of Christ can strengthen our faith and enable us to know what Jesus meant when he said that those who would save their lives will lose them, but those who were ready to lose their lives for his sake – in other words, to put Christ first in their lives – would find them.

I wonder what kind of people you would consider to be included within the multitude of holy people, saints, whom we commemorate and whose lives we celebrate at All Saints' tide? There has quite rightly been a tradition at this church of reminding one another, at this time of year, that if holiness, at its heart, is to do with being consecrated to God, with being saved from the consequences of sin by our faith in God through Jesus Christ, and by being in the world but not of the world, then we are all saints of God. It is not for us or indeed any person to make judgements as to whether one person is better or worse than another in their Christian life; that is for God alone. As St Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians, the Church is like a body with all its different parts; it is a unity in which everyone makes their own distinctive contribution to the whole; and indeed, as he says, it is precisely the parts of the body which seem to be the weakest which are the most indispensable ones. Let's never forget this; it's not necessarily the people with the strongest voices or who give the most money who are the most indispensable people in a Church. Everyone in a church matters; and sometimes it's actually the unexpected people who give most sacrificially, whose contribution is made largely behind the scenes, and whose compassion and care for others form the glue which holds a community of Christians together.

That being said, on All Saints' Day it is also good to reflect upon the example of those in the wider Church who can inspire us in our Christian discipleship; not just those who have been officially designated saints, but all who have committed themselves to following the ways of Christ at particular cost to themselves. I think, for example, of people like William Booth of Sneinton, who founded the Salvation Army, and his wife Catherine, both of whom devoted their lives to the material and spiritual needs of some of the poorest people in this country. I will also never forget, some years ago, seeing a graveyard for Christian missionaries and their families, going back to the 1800s, in a remote part of India; one wonders just how many such people lost their lives in the service of God and the Church in what were no doubt some very difficult areas for people from Europe, without all the support which the mission organisations of today can offer. I think also of a person who is held in great esteem in the Church in Zimbabwe, which I visited some years ago, a young man Bernard Mizeki, who refused to renounce his faith in the face of persecution and became the first African martyr of the Church in that area in 1896. We can also give thanks for those from the Anglican Church who in the 1800s were, in effect, missionaries to particular parts of this country where Christianity was hardly known; such as those known as the 'slum priests', mainly from an Anglo Catholic background who went to some of the most deprived areas of our cities to establish churches and to minister to the material and pastoral needs of those communities as well as responding to their spiritual needs. I also think of members of this church who have served All Saints faithfully over many years, sometimes decades, not seeing church membership as something that just comes and goes according to whim or fancy, but as a deep response to God and to the call extended to all people by Christ; in some cases bringing wisdom and experience drawn from other walks of life and indeed sometimes other countries; and I'm sure we can think of some such people who haven't necessarily been very 'hands on' but whose prayerfulness and regular attendance have been very much part of the fabric of this church.

On this our Patronal Festival day, let us therefore give thanks to God for all such saints, and for all those people, known and unknown, who have left their legacy of faith and service to the world wide Church and indeed to us, as members of the Body of Christ. Let us celebrate the Church Triumphant, the vast multitude of those who have passed from this life having followed the ways of Christ and having received their eternal reward. And let us continue in prayer for one another, and for all who seek to know God more deeply and to show forth in their lives the love which Christ brings to the whole world; that, whatever the form of service to which God calls us, it may be acceptable in his sight. Amen.

