

Reflection for All Saints by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

Throughout the church year, we have days where we recall and celebrate the lives of many of those whom the church has marked out as Saints. They range from the biblical Apostles, through the early church fathers, to more modern figures, St Paul, St Peter, St Frances, St Marnan to name just a few.

On each occasion we are encouraged to reflect on these figures who have struggled with the Christian faith in their own time and, as a result, stand before us as examples as we travel our own journey of faith. They are there to excite holiness within ourselves.

Today is All Saints and do not think so much about one saint but rather all the saints. We are thinking of the word "saint" as St Paul uses it at the end of his letter to Philippians *"Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The friends who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of the emperor's household."*

Paul is using the word "saint" not in a way that is limited to a chosen few, those of exceptional spiritual virtue, but in a way that encompasses all those who have faith in Christ: the Universal Church, those knit together, elect into one communion and one fellowship.

If you look at the word itself, it is derived from the word "sanctification" and refers primarily to the status of being in Christ, of being made Christ like. That does not, or should, not simply describe a few - those in some higher spiritual grouping; it should describe all who profess the Christian faith. Each of us should all be growing in discipleship; and becoming more Christ like.

Before the days of the pandemic, if you went to a major football match, the game may not always have been the greatest, but even with a stadium partially full there was a sense of unity among the fans; united in a common desire to see their team do well and to win.

The communion of saints: is held together by a common bond far more profound than that. We are part of the same family, united in Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life, for us all.

In the book of Revelation is a most wonderful image of heaven, and the first thing that strikes you is the vast multitude pictured surrounding the throne, made up of people from every nation, tribe and ethnic group.

"There before me was a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands."

This is no half-empty stadium here.

What we are given is a glimpse of the ultimate multinational and ecumenical gathering; the Universal Church, not only from round the world but also down the ages, gathered before Christ: A gathering to which we, as Christians, will belong.

That sense of unity and corporateness is overwhelming. **"We are the body of Christ"** becomes a reality in this picture.

It's a reality that at times we lose sight of in half empty churches and as we struggle so often, on our own, with our journey of faith. We forget we are part of something much bigger. As we gather for worship and to receive the sacrament we do so as part of the great multitude of saints. That should give us both hope and strength in our own struggles.

It brings to mind the words from Hebrews

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

We are not alone on our Christian journey.

But saintliness is not just about unity; it is also about reflecting the characteristics that are visible in Christ, brought to us in the pages of the gospels.

Think of the individual saints the church holds before us during the year. In so many cases their lives are marked by the characteristics of love and a willingness to sacrifice so much; walking in the very steps of our Lord, taking up their own cross and following him.

This is visible again in Revelation

“Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?” ...“These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

Therefore, “they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple”

Love and self-giving are characteristics that each of us should portray if we truly follow Christ. They should permeate our very being if we are living saintly lives. They are characteristics that should be apparent to those who come into contact with us as church community. It goes on from there, and should be seen in activity that is seeking to bring healing and restoration to our broken and divided world. That is what we see in Christ as he reaches out into the darkest corners and meet with those discarded or left out in the cold.

Sainthood does, at times, run contrary to many of the values that surround us. It does, at times, lead us to make choices that may well be questioned. It does often lead us along a paths where conflict is inevitable.

If there was ever a manual for saintly living, then surely the beginning of Matthew 5 is it. You may like to read it again and reflect upon it.