

## **Reflection for Pentecost 23 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last**

As we move into the autumn, as the days get shorter and the nights get colder, we come to a season of the year that I like to think of as All Saintstide. Wednesday was All Saints Day, Thursday, All Souls' Day, and next Sunday is Remembrance Sunday. Those are moments when we are encouraged to stop, look back and reflect, maybe even shed a tear.

Stand and look at the names on our local War Memorials. The memorial in Keith, for example, has over 350 names. They are much more than just names, they are individuals remembered, who gave everything in the service of others. Each has their own story, and the loss of each still touches their family and friends. Looking at those stories, reflecting on them, can help us in our moments of grief. I know putting the eulogy together for my own father's funeral helped me: it gave me an outlet for my memories and feelings. Expressing in some way those feelings can be so important. Thinking about All Saints, though, may be a little more difficult. Throughout the church year, the church sets aside days where we remember the lives of those whom the church, in its wisdom, has identified as Saints. This group ranges from the biblical Apostles, through the early church fathers, to more modern figures: St Paul, St Peter, Augustine, Benedict, Frances & Chad and even Marnan. In each case we are encouraged to reflect on these figures and how they struggled with the Christian faith in their own time and setting. As we do so we are challenged and encouraged in our own journey of faith. As one liturgical book describes it in its title, we look at them to "Excite Holiness" within ourselves.

All Saints, though, paints a much broader picture. 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's uses the word, "saint", not in a way that is limited to a select 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.

The word is derived from the word sanctification and refers primarily to the status of being in Christ, of being 'sanctified in Christ Jesus', of being made Christ-like. Such sanctification does describe a few, those in a higher spiritual group, but it should describe us all who profess the Christian faith. We should all be growing in discipleship; we should all be looking to become more Christ like.

Let me this morning expand for a moment of this idea.

While on holiday recently I went to a major football match and looking around the stadium, there was a very clear sense in which 95% of those who had come to watch were united in a common desire to see their team do well and to win. The stadium was a sea of blue and gold. The same is true of communion of saints. We have a common unity, we are held together by a common bond we are part of one family, a family that has its bond not in some transitory team but in Christ, the one who is the way, the truth, and the life for us all.

In the book of Revelation there is a most wonderful image of heaven and the first thing that strikes you is the vast multitude pictured surrounding the throne - so many that they could not be counted, made up of people from every nation and ethnic group. *After this I looked and 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.*

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. We are part of that crowd. To me the sense of unity and corporateness is overwhelming. "We are the body of Christ" becomes a reality in this picture.

It's something that we all too easily lose sight of in our small, half empty churches and, as we struggle so often on our own with our journey of faith, we quickly forget we are part of something that is so much bigger. As we gather for worship and to receive the sacrament we do so as part of that great multitude of saints. That should give us both hope and strength in our own situation. It brings to mind those 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. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, ...*

We are not alone on our Christian journey: we are but part of that great crowd, part of the crowd looking to Christ, part of the crowd that finds its unity in him and in him alone.

As I have said, the word saint has its roots in sanctification. Then saintliness is not just about unity it is also about reflecting the characteristics that we see in Christ. Think of so many of the individual saints the church holds before us during the year: in so many cases their lives are marked by the characteristics both of love and a willingness to sacrifice so much, walking literally in the steps of our Lord, taking up their own cross and following him.

We see this again in the images from 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 show if we are truly following Christ, characteristics that should permeate our very being if we are living saintly lives. They should firstly be seen within the worshipping community and the fellowship that flows from it. It should be apparent to those who encounter us as church community.

It does not stop there, though. It should be seen in activity - activity that is seeking to heal and restore our broken and divided world, just as Christ did - being prepared to go into the darkest corners and meet with those discarded or left out in the cold. As many of the saints have found, this does run contrary to many of the values that surround us. It does at times lead us to make choices that many will question, choices that are focused not on ourselves but others. It does lead us into the paths where conflict is, at times, inevitable.

If there was ever a manual for saintly living written then surely the beginning of Matthew 5 is it.

*"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

*Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*

*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.*

*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.*

*Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*