**1st November 2020**

**Psalm 33 and Matthew 5:1-12**

**All Saints’ Day**

Today is of course All Saints’ Day, November 1st, when it’s traditional that we celebrate all those who’ve gone before us, over the past two thousand years of Christian history. Especially, perhaps, we remember those whose faith was in some way noteworthy; exceptional, even; who sacrificed greatly for Christ, in some cases even with their own lives.

As we’ve just sung of them, “O blest communion! Fellowship divine! *We* feebly struggle, *they* in glory shine!” I don’t know about you, but there are many, many days on which it feels very much as though *my* attempts to follow in the way of Jesus are a “feeble struggle”, and that I’m an *awfully* long way from “shining in glory”, as these saints of whom we sing do; united in Heaven with the Lord, *their* & *our* maker.

But much as this may be the case, I’d like to suggest that there *is* clearly a purpose for us in our Christian faith, in acknowledging “the saints” – whether “Saints” is with a capital “S” or not; more about this distinction in a moment! – and in learning from them.

I wonder whether, as we’re all-too-aware that we’re heading into lockdown times once again, and as it seems life is becoming increasingly tough for us all once again, there are some things that these saints can especially teach us at this time…

In the Church of England’s calendar, we celebrate the festivals of many saints who lived in the centuries *before* the Reformation, and also particularly holy women and men of the worldwide church who have lived *since* the split of the Church of England from Rome in the 1530s – which has resulted in us having no formal Anglican machinery in this day and age, unlike the Roman Catholic Church, for the recognition (canonization) of such “Saints”.

There’s a danger, I think (that may perhaps be partly due to the lack of such a “saint-creating mechanism” in the Anglican communion), that the way in which Saints can be treated in our spiritual thinking and imagination, is as individuals who can *only* have lived in far historical times; that really *deep* Christian holiness was a purely *ancient* phenomenon that perhaps we should just not expect to see in our contemporary world.

If this is the case for you, I encourage you to do your best to break out of this way of thinking! On the West Front of Westminster Abbey, there’s a series of statues of ten *twentieth-century* martyrs, some of whom are well-known, such as Martin Luther King or Dietrich Bonhoeffer; and some of whom are much less familiar to us, such as the young South African woman killed for her Christian faith, Manche Masemola. In the lives – and deaths - of these ten women and men, we can see their love for Jesus Christ; a reflection of his person in their being; and an extraordinary commitment to the way of life he called us all to follow.

We see something of that way of life in the words of this morning’s first lesson, Psalm 33. The Psalmist declares that those who are, in his words, “righteous” in following God’s ways, show this in the character of their lives: through ‘uprightness’; ‘truth’; ‘faithfulness’; ‘justice’; and ‘love’. There’s a huge echo here of what St Paul describes in Galatians 5 as “the Fruit of the Spirit”; the ways in which the Holy Spirit working in us, shine out to be seen by others as our witness to the person of Jesus.

And we see this too in our Gospel reading; the part of Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount known as the Beatitudes - literally “states of blessedness”. St. Matthew gives to us in each of these eight “blessednesses”, first a *state* of being – “Blessed are the poor in spirit”; “Blessed are the merciful”; “Blessed are the peacemakers” – and then the *result* for those who are recognized as having these Christ-like qualities: “theirs is the kingdom of heaven”; “they will be shown mercy”; “they will be called Children of God”.

We recognise these qualities that Jesus presents to his followers as ones that would not *then* – and, equally, would not *now* – necessarily be seen as values against which the World would place especial store. If you were striving perhaps to be a captain of industry; or a Premier League footballer; or a world-renowned musician, I suggest that the attributes you’d be expected to show would most likely *not* include meekness; mercy; or a hunger and thirst for righteousness.

But Jesus declares that those who *do* demonstrate these values in their lives, in addition to the *specific* rewards that he says they will receive from God for living them out; will “*receive in heaven a great reward*”, since on earth they will have faced persecution for standing up for the way of Jesus; the way that he shows us through giving himself for *us*, on the cross.

This especial favour in God’s eyes; this “great reward in heaven” seems to be precisely what we’re promised, if indeed we choose to follow this way of Jesus; this “downward trajectory” of the way of the cross, as opposed to the “upward mobility” that seems so often to be the narrative of those who want “to get on” in the world. We *might* say that it seems to be the reward of the *“Saints”*…

But *which* saints, you might ask, returning to what I was saying earlier. Saints “with a capital S”, often rather grand historical – and therefore dead! – figures, whose festivals we may celebrate throughout the church year? Or “saints” as they seem to be referred to throughout the New Testament, meaning *any* follower of Jesus? Indeed, the Greek word in the New Testament that gets translated into English as “saint” is “hagios”, which simply means a holy person; a living member of the group of new Christians who have dedicated their life to following the teachings of Jesus.

My answer, as you’d perhaps expect, would not be one or the other, but “both/and”. *Both* of these groups of figures – the “dead Christian greats”, if you like, and the “present-day, passionate followers of Jesus” have a remarkably similar role to play, I believe, in our walk with Christ.

I’d like to suggest to you that there are *three* reasons why these saints – of both varieties! - should be important to us as His disciples.

The first of this is very simple. The lives of the saints show us, in different ages; in different cultures; in entirely different contexts, what it looks like to be a follower of Christ. They are living (or, in many case, they *were* living) examples to us in *practical* ways, and in countless different situations, of what it means to be Jesus to others. To volunteer to die, as Father Maximilian Kolbe did, in the place of another prisoner in Auschwitz. To speak out for the poor and the voiceless against the corruption of the ruling classes and the military, as the recently-canonised Bishop Oscar Romero did in 1970’s El Salvador. Or simply to devote one’s life to the service of others, often in apparently small ways, as so many Christians do in so many different contexts throughout our world, each of them tiny threads woven into the whole, beautiful embroidery of the people of God at work in His creation.

Secondly, we should be hugely encouraged by the lives of *all* the saints, great and small! As the writer of the letter to the Hebrews reminds us, in chapter 12 of that book, “We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses”; …..indeed it is *such* a great cloud of witnesses that the impact of them in our lives should be that we, encouraged by what they’ve done *in* and *for* the name of Jesus; / it should be that we “throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles,” as the writer of the letter tells us.

Their stories; their testimonies, their faith, should – as we declared together in our Collect – “*inspire* us to follow their example with boldness and joy”! We’ll declare shortly too, in our Preface to Communion for All Saints’ Day, that, “following *their* example and strengthened by *their* fellowship, [we give you thanks, Lord, that] we may run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” What an extraordinary gift this is, that *we’ve* received from *them*!

And, thirdly and finally, the lives of the saints; the ways in which so many of them gave up so much, in many cases life itself, in the service of Christ; should *challenge* us profoundly in our discipleship. Testimony is undoubtedly there to *encourage*; to bring us together in joyful celebration of the extraordinary gift that it is to follow Jesus & have him in our lives. But many of the saints’ lives show to us that there is also a profound *cost* to following Jesus: discipleship means *sacrifice*.

After all, God gave *His* all, in the person of Christ crucified, for each one of us. How much are we, following not only the example of Jesus but also the example of many of our brother & sister disciples; / how much are *we* prepared to be challenged by the witness of these saints; how much are *we* prepared to have our preconceptions shaken by their stories; how much are *we* prepared to give, as they too have given?

In the end, our God is not a God who somehow sits outside the universe, pulling strings to make things happen, to make his will come about.

God acts through women and men like *us*; GOD WORKS THROUGH US; through ME, and through YOU. God works through his saints; great, globally-recognised saints, and, if you like, “little saints”, saints whose names never hit the headlines, but whose impact we see throughout our daily lives. Their story is *His* story; & *their* story, *precisely* since it is *His* story, is also *OUR* story.

So let’s not fall into the trap of dismissing or discounting. At a time such as this, *so many* people in our communities, throughout our country, and across the globe, are in urgent and significant need - emotionally, mentally, physically, economically. As followers of Jesus Christ – “saints” – we don’t have glib solutions to fix what in many cases are complex and deep-seated issues in people’s lives or in society as a whole (though we *are* also called to fight for a just society – but that’s a sermon for another day!). However, *as* his “saints”, as the Psalmist says, “We wait in hope for the Lord; *He* is our help and our shield. In Him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in His holy name. May your unfailing love be with us, Lord, even as we put our hope in you. “ As his “saints”, we have an extraordinary opportunity at this time to bring this message of God’s love, and the hope we have through Jesus himself, into people’s lives, through acts of friendship; of kindness; of generosity; and of Christ-like love.

Let’s open our eyes and see in the actions of these women and men, the Kingdom of God breaking into our world; let’s listen for their voices and unite ours with their song; let’s discern their actions, and join – as we sang - in their labours; and, together, with all His saints, let’s build His Kingdom here on earth, as in Heaven.

In his holy name we pray, Amen.