

Sermon at St John the Evangelist at All Saints, 3rd November 2019

A Prayer of John Bell, of the Iona Community, on this All Saints Sunday: 'We remember and praise you, Lord, for the saints and martyrs of this and every age, whose lives, like seeds, dropped to the ground, yet whose witness has inspired us and borne fruit.'

+ a bidding of St Paul, in his remarkable Letter to the Ephesians; 'May you know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his *glorious inheritance among the saints*, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power, for us who believe.' (Ephesians 1.18-19)

Today we give God thanks for the witness of the saints, whose lives – like seeds – bore much fruit; and who have reflected to us the light of Christ... and as we do this, we think about how their witness - what St. Paul calls 'his glorious inheritance among the saints' – might transform our Christian lives today, as we take up our cross and follow Him.

It's good to remember, sometimes, that we stand on the shoulders of giants; men, women and children (ordinary and extraordinary) in whose lives we have glimpsed the grace of God; and who have – like a baton in a relay race – handed on to us the rich inheritance of faith. In the Apostles Creed we affirm our faith in 'the Communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins... and the life everlasting', but I wonder if we ever stop to think about why this Communion of saints – our 'great cloud of witnesses, as Hebrews puts it – matters, & what great sacrifices have been endured for us?

Not for the sake of hero worship, but because of the encouragement they can give us, as we seek to understand & be inspired in what it means to belong together, in the mystery of Christ.

I wonder who are the people who have inspired you, in your devotion to Christ, and in your daily walk of faith? The people, known and unknown – either officially saints, whose stories you've read about - or Christ-like (thought they would never have spoken in such terms) by their hidden acts of love & sacrifice, who have been real-life saints to you. Those gracious souls, not necessarily easy to live with, but with hearts set on God, whose presence has purified and sanctified our world; bringing God's Kingdom, the realm of eternity, into our midst... People who have spoken to our hearts and touched us with God's fire; people who have accompanied us, and bourn with us in our struggles; or who have challenged us, not giving us easy answers, but helping us to dream God's dream.

All of us will have people, I suspect, who have been like saints to us.... Whether in our families, our Christian lives or working lives, or those whom we've been drawn to, saints of old. So let's take a few moments, if you wish to, to turn to our neighbour, or a friendly looking stranger, to share something about someone who has been like a saint to you.... +You might like first to take a moment first to reflect and remember, before turning to share with your neighbour...

One of those people who was a saint to me was my father, who died over 20 years ago; someone who was born with a disability, but who strove (despite many obstacles) to make a difference – as a family doctor and disability rights campaigner – and who, despite his limitations, was always filled with love & laughter, & often tears... And then there have been those whom I met more briefly, in my travels, but whose life was full of the joy of the Lord, and the remarkable power of his love – people like Desmond Tutu, in Cape Town, and Brother Roger, of the Taizé Community in France... And then, for me, from a young age, there has been the influence of St Francis, whom I discovered (aged 14) and whose story has radically shaped my own encounter with the living Christ, in whose footsteps he walked.

I wonder what role saints play in your own discipleship & learning about Christ? + I wonder how they challenge you (& I) to discover what God's abundant grace really looks + feels like & how we can really live in the light of God's eternity – discovering where true joy comes from.

So let's look, at our readings – at what they have to tell us about the 'glorious inheritance of the saints' – before pondering some of the questions that they might leave with us today, in our context.

In Ephesians chapter 1 we discover a great symphony of God's spiritual blessings in Christ, which St Paul unfolds, in breath taking scope, weaving back and forth different threads of our inheritance with the saints, sharing together in a mystery far greater than ever we can conceive.

'I do not cease to give thanks for you' St Paul writes, 'as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe.'

It's as if Paul wants us to discover, once and for all, that we have all that we ever need, in Christ, who is the full revelation of God, and through whose Gospel we believe. And this is the interesting part, we have this inheritance of faith – not as a private possession – but as something essentially shared with others, and in and with the saints, who already share in the light of eternity, and who have handed God's word down to us. So the saints remind us, in an individualistic and unbelieving age, that we already belong with them, in the eternal mystery of Christ, who is triumphant in heaven, but whose grace and kingdom is already breaking in, if we set our hearts on Christ.

And then there is the Gospel of Luke, and the beginning of his 'sermon on the plain', whose Beatitudes – in puzzling ways – flesh out for us, in a little more detail, what living out this inheritance of faith looks like in practise. And of course they don't make comfortable reading:

'Blessed are you who are poor; blessed are you who are hungry now; blessed are you who weep; blessed are you when people hate you and exclude you and revile you and defame you on account of the Son of Man... Rejoice and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven.'

What Luke is not saying here is that suffering and poverty and persecution is a good thing in itself – as if God were some kind of sadist who enjoyed seeing us in pain – although the reality is that many Christians, then and now, experience life in this way; living without the things that many of us take for granted. But what Jesus points us to is this: that true life, true fulfilment – that which we all, in the end yearn for – comes not from material possessions, or rich food, or success in the world's terms – but out of a radical discontent with this world, through which we discover our overwhelming dependence on God.

The saints remind us that true joy comes from Christ, and from abiding in Him, rather than relying on the false consolations of this world. And out of this radical dependence on God, we are more likely discover a courage which leads us to love and serve others, as Christ loves, even our enemies. 'Do to others' Jesus says, the golden rule, 'as you would have them do to you.' So the inheritance of the saints – the real life of God's Kingdom – is one that radically upturns the values and priorities of this world and this age, and points us towards the age which is to come. An age however, which is not remote, but through those who belong to Christ, is breaking into the here and now. A message we definitely need to hear, as we anticipate next month's surprise General Election.

So I wonder what questions today leaves us with, and I wonder how St Paul's 'inheritance among the saints' might shape our witness to God's love – on this Gift Day, and at the start of this new season?

+ I'm just going to leave us with some open-ended questions, as we ponder what God might be saying to us today. And I invite you to reflect carefully, not least as you receive – at the end of this service – our letter for this Gift Day at St John's:-

- In the light of our inheritance with the saints, how do we truly 'belong' together in Christ, as His Body at St John's?
- How do we open ourselves to grow in the truth and love of Christ, and to nurture others - not least children, those who are on the fringes of our community, those who are unlike us?
- How do we live generously and sacrificially, continuing to proclaim Christ and serve this parish, at a time when - if present trends continue - we will not be able to sustain our ministry beyond the next twelve months?
- How do we serve those in greatest need in our congregation, including the sick, the anxious, and those approaching their death, as well as reaching out into our city, our neighbourhood, our places of work?

- How do we courageously reflect the light of Christ into a society so confused and turned in on itself - and a world weighed down by injustice, conflict and human slavery?
- + Finally, how do we pray & worship & meditate on God's word, in such a way as to open ourselves to God's presence, to find our true identity, and to be equipped for all that God calls us to do?

Let us pray: Eternal God, you have always taken men and women, of every nation, age and colour, and made them saints; like them transformed; like them, baptized in Jesus' name; take us to share your glory. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit Amen