

Called to be Christlike

A sermon preached by Rev Charles Draper on All Saints' Day, 29 October 2017 in St Peter's Wolvercote
Refs: *Revelation 7. 9 – end; 1 John 3. 1 – 3; Matthew 5.1-12*

All Saints' Day is the most democratic of all our Christian Festivals. Because All Saints' Day is not about the great saints, the famous saints, the well known ones. All Saints' Day is about the little saints – the ones that nobody has heard of. Those millions of saints, who don't appear in any books, who don't have any special days, whose names are forgotten, but who lived their lives as followers of Christ.

And that includes you and me. Because being a saint is not about being especially virtuous or devoted or fervent – in the New Testament, the saints are those who have been welcomed, accepted and loved by God, and have responded to God's call to be followers of Jesus.

So when St Paul writes his letters, for example to the Ephesians or the Philippians or the Colossians, he writes to the saints in Ephesus, or the saints in Philippi or the saints in Colossae. He's not writing to a few people here, he's writing to the whole church, all of whom he addresses as the saints, not because they are good or virtuous but simply because they are God's people, made holy in Christ not through any goodness of their own, but wholly by God's grace alone. So that includes you and me. St Paul would address us as the saints in Wolvercote. And we are all included in that. But what does that mean – what difference does it make?

It means we are part of one great family of God's people throughout the world and throughout history. We are part of One Body – the Body of Christ through all of time and space. As our first reading from Revelation beautifully puts it: *"a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages."*

It's good to remember that we are part of this – our fellowship with Christians throughout the last 2000 years, and our fellowship with Christians throughout the world today. I always think the Roman Catholic Church has an advantage here. Being a truly international body, they have a natural sense of unity across all nations and cultures. But we too can foster this through our international links and, more locally, through our ecumenical links, and by supporting and praying for our fellow Christians who are suffering persecution in so many parts of the world. And it's not just about supporting others. It's also about realising how much we can learn from them. I think it's a strength of the church here in Oxford, that there's a real awareness that we are part of this great worldwide family of God, across nations and cultures, and through time and history.

Right here in our local church, it means that all of us are fully part of the church family. We're not like spectators at a football match, cheering on from the stands while a few people run around energetically on the pitch. All of us are players, all of us are part of the team, all of us playing our part, each of us in our own way. There is no divide here between clergy and laypeople – we are all saints, all disciples, all in it together.

Here I have to correct myself. We often talk about the clergy on one hand and the laypeople, or the laity, on the other. But that's actually wrong, because the laity simply means the people, the people of God, so the clergy are part of the laity as well. We are all in this together. To take this further for a moment – we traditionally talk about clergy being in holy orders. But what is distinctive about clergy here is being "in orders" or being ordained. All of us are "holy", all of us are "hagioi" in the Greek, all of us are saints, by the grace of God. Truly we're all in this together.

To put it another way, all of us are disciples of Jesus, called to be part of God's work of mission and ministry here in this place. We thought about this back in June at our Patronal Festival Service, when we thought about St Peter as a model of discipleship, and how he learned through his mistakes.

On my recent Retreat at Lee Abbey, I thought about what it meant for me to be a disciple of Jesus. And if I'm honest I was really struggling with this concept. It felt like a pressure, pushing me to do what I didn't feel able to do. Then I felt that God was saying to me that his call to be a disciple of Jesus is not about what I do, but what I am. And suddenly it all made sense. Afterwards I remembered that's exactly what I said in my sermon in the summer. Being a disciple of Jesus is about what we are, not just what we do. I said it in my sermon, but I hadn't heard it myself!

The day after I came back from Retreat, I went on a Diocesan Financial Consultation. It was rather good because it began with Bishop Steven's vision for the diocese. You could have knocked me down with a feather when it began with the statement that the Diocesan Vision is not about ideas for things we should do – it is a vision for what we are called to be.

This new Diocesan Vision – led by Bishop Steven but coming out of a lot of prayerful discussions with a lot of people – is all about what it means to be God's people – to be All Saints'. The Vision is that we are called to be Christlike – we are called to learn to be Christlike communities. It's based on our Gospel Reading for today – Matthew 5 – the Beatitudes. Bishop Steven sums it up in three words – we are called to be Contemplative, Compassionate and Courageous.

Contemplative – as in spending time with God. As the Beatitudes puts it:

- Being poor in spirit, hungry and thirsty for God, knowing our need of God
- Being meek, learning to stand before God and others in humility
- Being pure in heart – meaning being authentic – the same on the inside as on the outside

And the second word - Compassionate – as the Beatitudes say:

- Mourning – alongside those who suffer
- Merciful – gentleness, kindness and forgiveness
- And hungry for justice in our society and in our world

And the third word – Courageous:

- Seeking for peace and reconciliation
- And willing to bear the cost of our discipleship.

At this point you realise that the call to BE is not an easy option – in some ways a few things to DO would be a lot easier! I've often wondered over the years why the Beatitudes are set for the Gospel for All Saints' Sunday. This year it made sense. The Beatitudes give us a beautiful though deeply challenging description of what it means to be called to be All Saints together, to be called to be, as Bishop Steven puts it, contemplative, compassionate and courageous.

So to sum all this up, All Saints' day is a day that celebrates all of us. We are all included, all by the grace of God called to be saints, all disciples of Jesus, all God's people, all in it together. And all part of that great worldwide body of Christ, throughout the world and throughout history. It's a huge privilege – that God is pleased to own us as his people. It is also a huge challenge – all of us playing our part, not spectators, but all joining in.

But we are reminded again that being disciples of Jesus is not so much about what we do as about what we are. And a wonderful picture of that is given to us in our Gospel reading today – the Beatitudes – God's call to learn to be a Christlike community – contemplative, compassionate and courageous.