

A Sermon for All Saints Day

A sermon preached by the *Revd Viv Bridges* on 4th November 2012 at 10.00 am at St Peter's, Wolvercote.

Isaiah 25, vv. 6-9, Revelations 21, vv. 1-6 and John 11, vv. 32-44

(quotations are from 'Take the Plunge', by Father Timothy Radcliffe OP. Pub: Bloomsbury 2012)

Preaching on All Saints' never seems to be an easy task. There seem to be so many different ideas about what makes a 'SAINT' and about what part they play in our lives today. It seemed sensible, then, to look at some examples of the Saints (with a capital S).

Looking through some books of Saints, I found:- Saints who were born into holy families, or who were the sons and daughters of noblemen and women, of kings and queens; Saints who were the children of shepherds, of cruel parents, of tyrants, of paupers (St Mawes, we're told, was born in a barrel, because his mother, Azenor, was thrown in to the sea near Brest with the barrel as a boat. They lived in this cask for 5 months!). Some Saints were orphans, or hardly knew their parents (when Bathildis was a young girl, she was captured by pirates and sold as a slave), and some spent many years living dissolute lives, driven by lust and selfishness (St Frances springs to mind).

I discovered men and women who were like St Peter - hot-headed, temperamental – or who were very eccentric – like John the Baptist - or like Christina of Belgium who apparently sat up in her coffin after having been thought dead, then dressed in rags, enjoyed being swung round and round mill wheels, and in an effort to escape the smell of humans, often hid in ovens or climbed into fonts! Some men and women spent their early years trying to destroy Christ's church – St Paul, of course. I also found that what made someone a 'Saint' was not necessarily glamorous or of huge importance. Although there were heiresses and socialites, kings and queens who did much 'good work', and many great theologians and teachers, writers, poets, scientists, artists etc, some Saints shut themselves away behind locked doors, only appearing to give spiritual direction when called upon, or they were shepherds, or cowherders, or kitchen maids.

So it seemed that the Saints came from all walks and conditions of life and had every type of character (including being not very likeable). There was nothing obvious in the outward practicalities of their lives that made them special. What did stand out for each and every Saint, of course, was their deep love of Jesus Christ, their devotion to him and their desire to always do his will, whatever this might involve. For some, this didn't seem too difficult – those drawn instinctively to lives of prayer and contemplation or doing good works. For others it was extremely difficult – constantly having to overcome their natural desires for the things of the world, and this was particularly true, of course, for those who had begun life as anything BUT holy but had had a complete change of heart. This could have been brought about in any number of ways. Occasionally it was a vision, a revelation – like St Paul's 'Damascus Road' experience. Quite often it was an accident, or a tragedy - falling off a horse, receiving a battle wound, falling ill, the death of a loved one. We're told that Julian the Hospitaller murdered his parents by mistake and spent his life trying to atone for this, and Illtud's companions, we're told, were 'swallowed by a bog'.

Something happened that made people realise the futility of chasing after things of the world, but it didn't mean that they suddenly became holy overnight. Often it meant a lifelong battle

with their own natures. And none of the Saints would have ever considered themselves 'perfect', without sin. They made mistakes (St Peter often got things wrong, and even denied Christ). But their love of God enabled them to seek his forgiveness and to get on with trying to do his will. So the qualifications for 'Sainthood' have very little to do with things of the world, or 'being perfect', it is to do with the heart, a deep love of God through Jesus Christ, and a desire to follow him.

Neither does 'being a Saint' have much to do with whether or not a person appears in a list of Saints with a capital S. Whether or not someone was officially recognised as a Saint – 'Canonised' – was often a question of 'luck', whether or not they were noticed and brought to the attention of the Church. There are, of course, countless saints who have never been recognised, many people around us today who live lives devoted to God, devoted to trying to do Christ's will. But where do 'The Saints' (particularly those we DO know about) fit in to our lives? For some they have a very important role to play, for others, they hardly figure except on the occasional 'Feast Day' that we celebrate in church. For many of the latter, the idea of 'asking the saints to pray for us' smacks of idolatry or of madness. But in his book 'Take the Plunge', Father Timothy Radcliffe tries to explain what is happening.

Father Timothy writes about living a 'Baptised life' and he goes carefully through the different parts of the Roman Catholic Baptism service. When he reaches the part where the prayers of the Saints are asked for he acknowledges that 'This may cause some Protestant hackles to rise'. They ask 'if we have a direct relationship with God in Jesus Christ, why do we need intermediaries?' This attachment to Saints looks like a betrayal of the Gospel – 'Salvation by faith alone'. Father Timothy insists that this is NOT the case – he assures us that it is not a matter of needing the Saints 'because God is remote, God is more intimate with us than any Saint could be'. But he reminds us that if we have a relationship with God, it flourishes when we are in mutual FRIENDSHIP with each other, and if we are caught up in God's friendship, we are close to ALL of God's friends, who include especially the Saints, for God's friendship breaks through the barriers of death.

Our readings today reminded us of Christ's promise of resurrected life and that those we love live on in some way, we are not divided by death. So our family of the Church includes not just the people around us today, but those people we love who have died, **and** all that 'cloud of witnesses' of the saints. Father Timothy points out that we would not find it strange asking a friend or someone we love to help us, including asking them to pray for us (we constantly depend on the prayers of our brothers and sisters in Christ) and this is what people are doing, Father Timothy asserts, when they ask the Saints to pray for them. It is not a question of putting them in the place of Jesus Christ, it is a question of asking that they join their prayers with ours as our brothers and sisters.

For some people, then, asking the Saints for help (eg St Anthony to help find something that is lost, St Jude in a particularly desperate situation or for a lost cause) is as natural as asking a member of the family to help them. Other people will feel uncomfortable about doing this. Either way is fine! But for **all** of us, the saints set us examples to follow. **Not**, thank goodness, all examples of perfection; rather, they show us that nothing that has happened in anyone's life precludes them from becoming 'holy'. What matters is our relationship with Jesus Christ.

In his letters, St Paul frequently addresses all the members of the early church as 'saints', not because he believes for a moment that they are perfect, but because he sees anyone who is in

relationship with Christ as being sanctified, made holy, by the Holy Spirit. So we can begin our journey to holiness at any point in our lives. The only thing we really need to start that journey is to **want** to, to want to love God a bit more, to try to be more like Jesus Christ. This may be something that has been in our hearts for a long time and each moment is a fresh start on our journey, or it may be the result of a crisis of some sort, or some sort of Damascus Road experience. Whoever we are, God longs for us to open our hearts and minds to him, to allow HIM, through the Holy Spirit, to guide us, to sanctify us.

This will happen if we give **time** to God - to prayer, to reading, to worship, to thinking about him, asking or talking about him. But it doesn't promise us an easy journey. As we try to put Christ before ourselves we shall doubtless get it wrong – frequently – whoever we are. But once again the examples of the saints show us that we can trust God's promise of forgiveness, and his promise to strengthen us to get up and start again when we fail.

Let us pray that we may all be granted *something* of the saints' love of God, through Jesus Christ, and their desire and longing to be like Christ, so that whoever and wherever we are, we can start, or start afresh, our own journey to holiness, to deepening our love of God. Then we *shall* take the place that God has already reserved for us in that great multitude of the heavenly host, as one of his friends.

Amen.