

Feasting with the Cloud of Witnesses

a sermon preached on the Feast of

All Saints

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at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr David Moore

parish priest

Lections: Daniel 7:1-3,13-15; Luke 6:20-31

I will tell you a story from the time soon after Christ.

Some pagans were teasing a couple of little Jewish girls, and trying to laugh them out of their religion. What could be more absurd than the hope of resurrection? How shall the person rotted and gone to clay ever live and breathe again?

The little Jewesses whispered together for a moment. Then one of them said: 'May I tell you a story, please?' 'Go on', said the others. 'In our village', said she, 'there were two potters. One of them could make pots out of water and clay. The other could make pots out of water alone. Which of them, do you think, was the more surprising in his skill?'

*'Well, of course, you are talking nonsense', they said, 'but if there were such men, the making of pots out of mere water would be much more surprising.' 'Then why are you more surprised,' said the child, 'that God should make new again out of clay, than that God should have made them out of a drop of water in the beginning?'*¹

It would be a strange belief, comments Austin Farrer, which allowed God to have had the power to create all things, and yet denied God the power to remake the human person.² By whatever name we adopt as a matter of personal or tribal preference, the extraordinary power to fashion all living things from star dust and subatomic particles – including the extraordinary complexity of the human body – surpasses even the nonsense of the potter who fashions with water only.

It is this nonsense which we celebrate on All Saints day. Not a day to extol the virtues of particularly heroic or virtuous individuals. Certainly not a day to set up a bunch of plaster idols, religious celebrities, special persons whose lives we are meant in some way to emulate. To emulate them is nonsensical anyway, because no two of us is called in exactly the same way. Yes, of course, there are particular persons who have fired our imaginations, fanned the flames of our faith, and spurred us on to creative action. But All Saints is not their day. Rather, this feast celebrates the power of the God who breathed life into the whole creation *to breathe again*, to re-create, to make a new creation, the new humanity envisaged by Daniel, to bring to completion the whole of the creative undertaking. This astonishing undertaking is not initiated by stoic or pious actions of particular persons – though mysteriously does require willing involvement – but by the profligate and abundant graciousness of the One who set the whole thing on fire in the first place – the author of 'the fire in the equations.'³

I suspect that our true difficulty is not whether we believe, or how we believe, that the equations got fired up in the first place. Neither is it in whether or how the equations are re-fired, re-created, re-fashioned, whether it takes just a drop of water, or a bag of clay, or just a speck of star dust and sub-

¹ Farrer A, 'All Saints', in *Words for Life: Forty Meditations Previously Unpublished*, Edited by Conti & Houlden L, London: SPCK, 1993, p21.

² Farrer A, p22.

³ Hawking S, *A Brief History of Time*, London: Bantam Press, 1996, p209.

atomic particles. My hunch is that the real scandal is that so accustomed have we been to radically separating the potter from the pot, the equation-maker from the equation, the fire from that which burns, that we are simply overwhelmed by the prospect that we are actually showered with divine fire, immersed in God's tidal wave of water droplets, holy clay. In spite of being the supposed bearers of the evangel of Incarnation – the Divine enfleshment in humankind, indeed all creation – we have done a fine job of putting asunder what God had joined together. Herein lies the real shock of All Saints – that “religion is not fundamentally a battle against sin, it is a drawing up together [of everything] into glorification,”⁴ that all things in heaven and earth may be completely one,⁵ for the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains.⁶

All Saints is therefore about *us*, not in some cheap and sentimental way, and not in some imagined future time and place into which we will march triumphantly with a brass band if we have passed the test - but about the Divine fire in the equations of our very ordinary lives, and the very ordinary lives of countless millions of others before us, beside us, around us. God's fire, God's sub-atomic particles and water droplets are us, become and becoming. In this tremendous adventure of becoming we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, more in number than all the grains of sand on the seashore and the stars in the heavens. It is they who are our fellow-guests, bound together in one communion at the Banquet of the Lamb, the Wedding Feast of the Kingdom, the Eucharistic Body and Blood of Christ.

Thanks be to God!

david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz

⁴ Farrer A, p22.

⁵ John 17:20-24

⁶ Romans 8:23