

## All Saints Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> November 2018

### Readings:

Isaiah 25:6-9

Revelation 21:1-6a

John 11:32-44

### Reflection

‘The gathered glories’

*Though Satan breaks our dark glass into shards,  
Each shard still shines with Christ’s reflected light,  
It glances from the eyes, kindles the words  
Of all his unknown saints. The dark is bright  
With quiet lives and steady lights undimmed,  
The witness of the ones we shunned and shamed,  
Plain in our sight and far beyond our seeing,  
He weaves their threads into the web of being.  
They stand beside us even as we grieve,  
The lone and left behind whom no-one claimed,  
Unnumbered multitudes, he lifts above  
The shadow of the gibbet and the grave,  
To triumph where all saints are known and named;  
The gathered glories of his wounded love.<sup>i</sup>*

So Malcolm Guite reflects on the commemoration of All Saints.

Our connectedness to one another in God rests on the foundation of all those who have gone before us as believers - a lineage of saints stretching back to Jesus’ first disciples, those without whose witness to God’s mighty deeds we would not ourselves be disciples.<sup>ii</sup>

The origin of All Saints Day in the Western Church dates back to the seventh century when Boniface IV consecrated the old Roman Pantheon to the Blessed Virgin Mary and all martyrs (by the way, the word *martyr* simply means witness). Earliest observances of All Saints Day occurred in the month of May connecting it with the Roman festival of *Lemuria* (when the feared ghosts of the dead were exorcised). Only later, was November 1<sup>st</sup> chosen for All Saints Day.

The communion of saints was a vivid reality to early Christians. The Roman State fearing any challenge to its absolute authority, made Christianity a perilous vocation. Some early Christians shed their lifeblood for their beliefs, and martyrdom was virtually a defining characteristic of sainthood. Tertullian, an early Christian theologian, called ‘the blood of martyrs, the seed of the church’.

Early Christians venerated the memory of the martyrs. Unfortunately, we’ve had in the past, a tendency to make these saints ‘unreal’. These men and women seemed to assume transcendence and power that extended even beyond death. This sense of power led to the belief in miracles often associated with their relics.

But many saints were *despised* in their own time. Many of them paid dearly for their particular vision of Christianity. From James of Jerusalem to Thomas Becket, from Catherine of Siena, to Martin Luther King. Some suffered persecution at the hands of the institution that now honors them. (As Jesus speaks in the Beatitudes – ‘*Blessed are those who are persecuted for my name’s sake...*’ And recall the accusations brought by the martyr Stephen to the council in Jerusalem, recorded in Acts: “*You stiff-necked people...which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute?’”).*

In more recent times, William Tyndale comes to mind - burned at the stake for his commitment to a contemporary English translation of the Bible. And another

hero of the faith: Martin Luther, who in nailing his 95 theses to the church in Wittenburg in 1517, initiated the Protestant Reformation including a German translation of the Bible, and was excommunicated from the church for heresy. Only time and distance have given these and many others, their dues.

So – besides martyrdom and persecution - what makes a saint a saint? The most popular idea seems to have something to do with being good. Saints are good people or people who did good things, lived good lives, and inspired others to do so. We tend to think of saints as caught up in some sort of Beatific Vision when not engaged in prayer or good works. They take on the trappings of perfect Christians.

But it seems not all saints were always good or always did good things. How did they manage to become Christian heroes?

Saints are people who consciously, often not easily, choose to embrace the being they've been given, with all of its gifts and all of its limitations. In accepting one's being, in choosing to be completely human, saints have embraced holiness. Saints are people who have accepted the challenge of being a human with all its promise and limitations and who "lovingly accept the truth of" their Being.

Perhaps it's easy for us to put saints on pedestals, because that way we can keep their living witness and challenge to us at arm's length. We can more easily dismiss them. But saints are men and women who understand the challenge of living the gospel in the context of their own place and time. They are remembered because they lived it with imagination and devotion. They used what they had been given to live their lives into the freedom of God's kingdom.

When we mark the feast of All Saints, we celebrate all those who have claimed their place in glory by living lives of hope and faith. All Saints' Day is not a celebration of perfection, but the fulfillment of a promise made *to us* by *Christ*

in our baptisms. The promise of triumph which we celebrate at All Saints' is for *all* of us, not some collection of stained glass perfect people but rather for those who have lived lives of *hope*, or even just attempted to do so. People like Mary, Martha and Lazarus – those dear friends of Jesus who loved him and put their trust in him; people like the mourners who gathered at Lazarus' tomb, and who unbound him and set him free. In the account of the death and raising of Lazarus, we have a foretaste of the death and resurrection of Jesus – the Christ who has unbound us all and set humanity free. The stench of death and sin has been redeemed. The promise we celebrate at All Saints is for all of us who are living lives of *faith*, or even just attempting to.

May we remember with gratitude, the saints who have touched our lives with their witness, love and encouragement. And in the coming week may *we* share that witness, love and encouragement with others. In the name of God...

Helen Roud

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<sup>i</sup> Malcolm Guite, *Sounding the Seasons*, Canterbury Press, 2012

<sup>ii</sup> Br. Jonathan Maury, *Society of Saint John the Evangelist*