

## ALL SAINTS 2017

There was a very significant event this week. I wonder if you can guess what it was? The 31<sup>st</sup> October was the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Martin Luther nailing his Ninety-five Theses on the door of the All Saints' Church in Wittenberg which we know changed the world as we know it. And gave birth to the tradition in which we stand. That of Anglicanism. One of the many things Luther was speaking out against was what he saw as the over indulgence and wealth of the church compared to the poverty of its members.

This was seen most vividly in the way the church at the time was offering indulgences to help loved ones out of purgatory. And so it is no coincidence that he nailed his theses to not only the church of All Saints but also on All Saints day. The very feast which celebrates the dead and those who have begun their journey to God. We also have in our Gospel this morning one of the most well-known parts of the

scriptures, the Beatitudes. This Gospel also connects with what Martin Luther was trying to achieve. Re-emphasising the importance of caring for the poor and vulnerable. But like every movement such as the reformation sometimes there are extremes.

For it seems to me that the Christian faith is constantly walking a tight rope between extremes, I say this because there is always the danger that we venture in to extremes neglecting what the other side might be saying to us. Take the gospel reading for today. What is Jesus trying to say? On a simple reading, you could easily equate his message to a formula. If you are poor, you have a special place in the heart of God and therefore should remain in your position. To the rich, the message is that you are greedy and therefore you have to give your money away.

The problem with this simple reading is that it doesn't make sense. We all know that we don't want people to be poor, we know it is not healthy for a good society.

Jesus spoke to the crowds throughout his ministry. The context of such teaching as the beatitudes is not an individual pep talk. It is a speech to a large gathering of people. Therefore, Jesus' teaching was not to be aimed at one particular person, but at the collective whole. It was then up to the individual to make his decision about what he will give and how he will give. For me it speaks of community. And that is one of the things we remember on All Saints. That the church isn't just us as individuals, but that we belong to a giant cloud of witnesses.

There also seems to be a contrast in our other scripture readings this morning. The contrast is that they all speak of life through death. The readings speak about an end to death, grief, pain, sorrow, all the things which spoil life. Revelation tells us that heaven is a place where separation from God or separation from others doesn't exist anymore. Unity with God and with all people is the goal.

It all sounds too good to be true. Our lives don't seem to be like that. We may be struggling with the pain of grief, either through the death of someone close to us, through the loss of a job, through the loss of health, through the breakdown of a relationship. There are many things which cause grief. So we may find it hard to believe what the readings are telling us about life. These promises of life are not trying to deny the grief we all feel. But rather an expression of the hope we have in the goodness of God.

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Jesus wept. He was moved with compassion, deeply disturbed. Jesus is not unmoved or detached from the tragedy of human life. And because he is involved he wants to do something about life.

But how are we to live with the reality of grief and death and yet also have hope in the resurrection? We know only too well that there are times in life when we are not like the people described in these readings.

In the pain of grief we cry out, When will it end? The beatitudes seem to hint that we have to live with the paradoxes which our lives contain. For how can the poor and persecuted be blessed?

One of the curious paradoxes is that it is not until we accept the reality of the situation, the reality that life is not perfect, that hope returns and we begin to live again. It is a process of transition which we have to go through to find new life. That is the reality of our experience which is described so well in the readings. Life comes through death. So how then are we to experience this life through death on our Patronal Festival? What do All the Saints say to us?

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When I visit people's homes I am always fascinated by the many photographs they have on their walls and mantelpieces. Some of the photos are clearly from a different era in black and white and people in clothes

from a by-gone era. Some were relations, some family friends.

All these strangely dressed people in yellowing photos hold such an important part in these people's lives. They are ancestors, people who have died but now live through their images and the memories they invoke.

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Today we celebrate All Saints and we behold these photos anew. All the saints, those known to us and those unknown. We want to look at these people and know we belong to this great family of those who belong to God. I'm sure that over the years as you have celebrated your Patronal Festival you will have been told many times, we are the saints. The letters of Paul are often addressed to the saints in a particular place. That means all the followers of Jesus in that town were the saints.

And the same applies to anyone who follows Jesus now. So why then do we have All Saints as our patrons? What are we to do with this title that reminds us of all those who have gone before us. Many of these saints of the past didn't do anything heroic, or even exceptionally religious. They just tried to witness to their faith in their daily living. It was that ordinariness of trying to follow God's call that led some of them to extraordinary devotion and deeds of service. Others are remembered for simple consistency and faithfulness to their call. Now we say we are surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses – those who held fast to their faith even when it brought suffering and death.

I think we can take heart from their example, even if it seems a little remote from our own life. We take heart because as we learn from our readings it is not what we do that matters, but what God does. It is God who provides the heavenly banquet, it is God who takes away grief, it is God who raises the dead. It is what God did in these people we call saints that is important not what they did. When we bring out the whole box of family photo's that means we cannot concentrate on any particular deeds of the saints. It is simply their witness to God acting in them all which is important. And that means it is what God does in us that we need to focus on.

Maybe we can ask ourselves some questions like "How is God seen in my daily living? Does the glory of God shine in me like it does in the saints? How might we as a parish show the glory of God in this community which surrounds us? Is the love of God made visible by our service to this community where we are the heart?"

If we seek the prayers and protection of our patrons, then we will become like them. We too will be able to reveal the love and glory of God, the one who came among us to serve.

To be a saint then is to get rid of evil and to promote that which is good, like the beatitudes from Matthew's Gospel. To be a saint is to belong to the great company of people who have gone before us, and also to belong to those who are here; to be a saint is to live in hope because of the promises God has made to us in the resurrection of Jesus. This is how we can create a foretaste of heaven here in this place called Birkenhead. We create it by welcoming others who wish to belong, by proclaiming that the poor, persecuted and meek are truly blessed.

Give thanks at this Eucharist for the example of the saints. Give thanks at this Eucharist for this chance

we have of being filled with the life of God in Christ. Give thanks at this Eucharist for the responsibility we are given to be the glory of God in a human being fully alive.