

**ALL Saints Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> November 2020.**

**(Revelation 7:9-17). 1 John 3:1-3, Matthew 5:1-12**

I am sure I was not alone in using some of the time, when we were all confined to our homes earlier this year, to tidy things. In one pile of papers I was sorting, I came across a service sheet from a Salvation Army service I had attended with friends last year. At the bottom was their Mission Statement: 'Our mission – to save souls, grow saints and serve suffering humanity'. The idea of having a mission to 'grow saints' stuck with me and I was reminded of it again as I thought about this service for All Saints Sunday.

One dictionary definition of a saint is 'A person officially recognized, especially by canonization, as being entitled to public veneration and capable of interceding for people on earth'. Maybe that is our image of a saint. If so, the notion that it is our mission to grow such people is rather daunting to say the least. But the Church of England in its introduction to this season of the church year reminds us that 'Through baptism we each become members.... of a *company of saints* whose mutual belonging transcends death. And St Paul made it clear that the church is full of saints here and now, by beginning nearly all of his letters to the young churches with greetings such as "to the church of God that is in Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi .... called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ". There is no other person specification for being a saint than that. We are called to be saints through baptism, and it is an inclusive calling. We are also called through baptism to ministry. Or as the Church of England puts it elsewhere: "all who are baptised are called to ministry, whether that is lay or ordained". And that too is inclusive, as they go on "God calls young people and older ones, wealthy and poorer... the Church's ministers come from all walks of life, social classes, ethnic backgrounds and educational abilities" (Vocation: do you have a calling? 2015). Our calling to be saints and our calling to ministry go hand in hand.

So today as we celebrate All Saints, we celebrate people who have, in some way through their lives, shown the love of God to others, both those who have gone before us and those who are among us now. Each of us may point to those who have influenced our own journeys of faith, whether they are famous as saints whose lives we read of from days gone by, or those whose faithfulness has more directly shown us something of the mystery of God, or the person sitting with us in church or, in these days, worshipping with us from home. These are the saints, whose ministry it is to grow saints. Perhaps they were aware of the influence they had, perhaps they were not. Some of them were ordinary people, doing extraordinary things. Many are ordinary people doing ordinary things in lives of love and service. But all have been sufficiently open to God that he could speak to us through them. These are members of the company of saints, who we cannot count, but who surround us as we seek to follow Christ.

And we are invited to hold that picture alongside the Gospel reading of the teaching of Jesus from the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount, that we sometimes call the Beatitudes. They were given as a guide to faithful living for all who are called to be saints. Not self-righteous or proud, but humble in spirit, who suffer, mourn, know their weaknesses, hunger for righteousness, strive to be peacemakers. These are the qualities of living that Jesus tells us make for a blessed way of living, not because they will lead to material reward, status or personal acclaim, but because they bring us into a right relationship with God. Blessed even though following his way may bring us through painful or costly times.

Perhaps we might be tempted to hear them as promises of future blessings: If they live well, these will see God, will be free from want, will be comforted, will receive mercy. But as Jesus taught in the next part of his sermon, we are to pray that God's kingdom comes, and God's will be done 'on earth as it is in heaven'. The

Beatitudes are a commission to all to be saints who strive to live in the present, in a way that is consistent with God's promised future, that has already begun in the coming of Jesus. They describe as 'blessed' the lives of people who are learning to rely on God in their everyday living and working for the day when God's kingdom will be finally and fully revealed.

Sometimes perhaps we doubt ourselves worthy of this calling; not good enough to be called saints. If that stops us being complacent that's no bad thing. But being a saint, growing saints and growing as saints is about being open to God, aided by the prayers and fellowship of all those known and unknown saints who surround us in love. God can do amazing things with ordinary lives if we let him. This does not necessarily mean achieving great things or feats of daring for the faith. God is also the God of small things and little steps. Thankfully, God will not call everyone to martyrdom, but he will call each of us to stand up for our faith: to witness to Christ in the workplace, shops, communities, or wherever we find ourselves. God will not ask everyone to travel to far off places to preach the Gospel, although I have discovered he can take you a bit by surprise, when you least expect it, with things like that. It is up to each of us to discern how, where and in what way God is calling us to our ministries, to grow saints and grow as saints. It is for each of us to support and encourage one another as we do so.

Rumour has it that today I am retiring from ministry. Now here is the thing: there is no such thing as retirement from ministry, just as we do not at any point in our lives cease to be called to grow as saints. But how and where we exercise our ministries may change for all sorts of reasons: personal circumstances, family commitments, work, health - and sometimes because God intervenes and nudges us, as he has been doing with me over recent months, to accept being moved on into something different. But none of these stop us from being ministers for God, saints for God in this world. I may be leaving here today, but tomorrow my ministry will look much the same, just in a different place and pattern, alongside and among others who are seeking to live lives worthy of *their* calling to be saints. And your ministry here will continue in whatever way he has called each of you.

As we celebrate All Saints today it is good and right that we remember and give thanks for all those who have gone before us and pointed us to God. But let us not simply look back – or up - in our remembering of saints. Let us remember that we too are called to be part of this community of saints now and pray that by our living and by God's grace working in and through our lives, one day there will be others who will look back and give thanks for the example we have set and for the saints we have grown.

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