

The point of Saints

All Saints Day which we celebrate today is important., and we mustn't miss out on it. It is a sort of portmanteau festival for the benefit of those saints who don't get a day to themselves.

The issue I want eventually to come to is "what is the point of saints' days in general, and of All Saints Day in particular?" But first of all we have to define what we mean by saints. The first definition in the O.E.D. is no doubt correct in terms of the main usage of the word, but is incorrect theologically. It says "Holy, canonised or officially recognized by the Church as having won by exceptional holiness a high place in heaven and veneration on earth." And indeed that is how people usually use the word - "I'm no saint", they say. But history has given to certain Christians the right to be prefixed by St, rather like an ecclesiastical eternal-life peerage. And in the Roman Catholic church the process of canonisation of the distinguished goes on still today. Some of those who have been so honoured in years past are obscure, to say the least. And the way they are remembered may bear little connection with their life and work. Poor St Bruno, for instance is more likely to bring to mind a pipe rather than his work as founder of the Carthusian order of monks. But then his monastery at the Grande Chartreuse is better known as a liqueur than a place for holy men to live! The unfortunate St Leger, who was cruelly murdered because he got into political hot water with the Frankish mayor of Autun in 670, is more likely to make people think of horse-racing. Forty years of pastoral care of mountain residents is less likely to come to mind than large dogs if you mention St Bernard, and St Michael, the archangel and Captain of the Heavenly Host became for my generation at least the patron saint of underwear.

More correct theologically is the third definition the OED suggests: "one of the blessed dead or other member of the company of heaven." For the New Testament refers to all believers, living and dead as "saints". So look around you - it may surprise you to label the person on your immediate right and left as "a saint". It may be even more disturbing to think of the person between them as a saint as well. But that is how it is. The ones with the label, the ones in the dictionaries of saints are just a selection. Some of you may know Ronnie Knox's parody of the hymn "We love the place O God." It contains the lines:

We love the windows bright,
With red and yellow paints,
Presenting to our sight
The better class of saints.

But his jest leads me to the famous, and absolutely ideal definition which is said to come from a small child, who on being asked what a saint was, could only think of the stained-glass windows, and so

replied "A saint is someone the light shines through." How right that child was. For me, that is the ideal definition, and I would like, if I may, to develop it a little. The child started with stained-glass. And there is no doubt that saints are people who bring colour into life. And remember, I am talking about the kind of saints that include you and me. We should be bringing warmth and colour into the drabness and bleakness of the world. We have a story of love and forgiveness, or hope and joy to share. That is colourful, attractive and bright - or it should be. Letting the light of God shine through us should enable others to be happier than they otherwise might be. We have colour to offer.

The child obviously did not think of ordinary glass - but saints should also have the property of being transparent. In fact the great theologian Paul Tillich once wrote exactly that: "The saint is a saint, not because he is 'good' but because he is transparent for something that is more than he himself is."

Christians should be transparently honest, transparently sincere. The maximum light gets through glass if it is not streaked and dirty, cloudy or defaced. We need to be crystal-like in our transparency - so that the light of God can really get through. It is rather the compliment that Jesus paid Nathaniel - "there is nothing false in him."

And maybe there is a third kind of glass that saints ought to be - and that is magnifying glasses. A magnifying glass enables people to see something more clearly. We ought to be enabling people to see God more clearly. We are to be a lens which projects the image of God so that more people can see it. A magnifying glass can set tinder alight. And if we fulfil our calling to be saints, we will be able to focus God's love, so that people are set alight with love for him.

So that is what saints are - not the few special official ones, but people living in this world or the next who let the light of God shine through them, so that they bring colour, warmth, the light of God into the world, and set people's hearts on fire. And that job-description is a compulsory one for everyone who is baptised. We are "called to be saints", as Paul wrote to the Corinthians Christians.

So if that is what saints are, what is the point of saints days - and of All Saints Day in particular? Let me very briefly suggest three reasons. First of all, we need to get things in a proper context. When the writer of the letter to the Hebrews said "Seeing we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses" he was on to something we tend to forget. We see the church as small and probably quite insignificant. If about a quarter of you could stand up – that represents the proportion of the world that is Christian. Now if we could just have a tenth – to represent the whole church today – then Anglicans would be just the head and shoulders of just one person – and the Church of England is just the hairs on one person's head. We are not powerful and awe-inspiring. But rather like Elisha praying that his servant could see the chariots of fire surrounding them, we need our eyes opened to what "the Communion of Saints" is all about. We do indeed worship, as we say in this service "in the company of St Paul and all the saints". We are part of the great company of the saints in every age.

Secondly, we need to remember our heroes. They may be the greatest names - the ones who get a day to themselves. Even those may not be really *known* to us. Let me just run through the saints whose special days fall during the coming month. There are twenty-three of them. Just keep a count as I read their names of how many you really *know* about. You could do that on one hand, and on the other tot up how many you have never even heard of. Richard Hooker, Martin do Porres, Leonard, William Temple, Willibrord of York, Margery Kempe, Leo the Great, Martin of Tours, Charles Simeon, Samuel Seabury, Margaret of Scotland, Edmund Rich, Elizabeth of Hungary, Mechtild of Magdeburg, Edmund, King of the East Angles, Priscilla Sellon, Cecelia, Clement of Rome, Catherine of Alexandria, Isaac Watts, and Andrew. It may be our heroes are much less well-known saints - the people who through their faith have enabled us to see something of the light. They may be people whom we have known personally, or people whose words we have read, or about whom we have heard. What they said and did continues to be part of our history.

And then thirdly, as well as recalling them, we need to be inspired by them. Our collect today said, you recall, "Give us grace so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those inexpressible joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you." Being virtuous or godly isn't very fashionable. But believing has its demands on our way of living - we are Christ's ambassadors, representatives whose attitudes, words and lifestyle will either commend our Lord, or not. The saints of previous generations have given us an example to live up to - the great ones, the obscure ones, the very very ordinary ones. They were, as we are, a mixed bunch. They include lovable eccentrics, and people who today would probably be sectioned for their own safety. Some were peaceable, but some were quite vindictive and vituperative, and disliked by many. We mustn't think of them as too cosy a bunch. But that is what God's saints must be - a people who are not perfect, but transparent enough to let the light of God shine through them. It is good that they are not too perfect - they couldn't inspire us to be saints ourselves if they were. They did their best, and we can do ours. We bless God for them today, in all their variety, and rejoice in their fellowship as we worship around the throne of God.