

A Sermon for All Saints Day - 1st November 2020 - Matthew 5:1-12

Who, then are these, robed in white, and where have they come from? What does it mean to be a saint?

Today we've heard the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' instructions for enabling us to recognise the saints when we hear or see them.

That sermon, sometimes treated as though it can be extracted from the Bible and read as a discrete set of laws, is not an optional extra.

It's not "be baptised and then try to follow this rather impossible set of rules", but is a description of the church in the world, so "be baptised, and find yourselves amongst a group of people who look," and this is putting it politely, "mildly peculiar".

Find yourselves among a group of people who shape their communities around the mourners, the merciful and the meek.

The Sermon directs us straight to Christ, for it is preached by God's Son. Unless we are conformed to Christ, we will struggle to hear it and interpret it.

What I would like Jesus to say is "Blessed are the compromised", "Blessed are the messy" and "Blessed are the people who will struggle to make it through the day", but frustratingly, instead, we have "blessed are the meek".

So, what are we to do?

Jesus doesn't address us in the Sermon as individuals, but speaks to us here at St Botolph's as a community. He tells us what we already know, that we cannot exist without one another. We're not all expected to be meek, poor in spirit, persecuted or peacemakers, but if none of us are, then we're no longer the church, Jesus seems to say.

These qualities can only be found in community.

One cannot try to be poor in spirit or to be meek.

They are gifts that are to be found in followers of Christ, because Christ himself embodied them.

And when we put on Christ, we will discover in our midst those who are pure in heart. We will glimpse a world that is turned upside down, and a church that contains some people who'd never be recognised as valuable by the world. The Sermon on the Mount, then, is not a call for heroes in a culture that desires a quick fix.

How we long for heroes to rescue us from the relentless news cycle of terrorism and famine and war and abuse and corona virus. Heroes are solitary and often

autonomous figures who can save the world only through their unique super-powers. They are watched and judged and cannot afford to make mistakes.

Saints, by contrast, always appear in the New Testament in plural. They've no need to be the "centre of the story" because Christ plays that role. If the saint fails, then there is always the possibility of repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Perhaps we'd prefer heroes and heroines and bravery and valour and conquest and victory, but saints know they cannot achieve salvation by their own efforts.

But, I wonder, when we discover the saints are sometimes as imperfect as us, are we disappointed? "If they can't do it, how is there any hope for us?" we might ask. It's tempting to airbrush the saints to a state of perfection, but that leads to idolatry. It is easy to idolise the people that we don't have to live with, who don't sulk or nag or leave socks on the floor.

Today, we observe the feast of All the Saints because under the Roman persecution of Diocletian, so many Christians were martyred that there weren't enough days to observe each of them.

Eventually, the day was expanded to include all saints, whether martyrs or not. We invoke the prayers of the saints because the church is confident that they have attained fullness of vision in God.

We recognise that some people make good in ways that most of us won't. These people, we call, the Church Triumphant, but interestingly, they have always emerged from local congregations of Christians. Congregations like this one.

Saints, then, are recognised, not created. The Prayer Book reminds Anglicans to recognise saints, "Hear what Saint Paul sayeth", "Hear what Saint John sayeth", not because these people were sinless, but because their lives were especially oriented to Christ.

So, we have the official saints, but can we call all Christians saints? We can, and we can describe ourselves as the Church Militant, not because we're ferocious, but because we labour to follow Christ.

The Church Militant is all of the baptised. It's all of us who are in the process of becoming saints, for as John puts it, "we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed..." Being God's children, we are friends of God.

So some are formally canonised, but some are not and are seen as the person in the pew over there or over there. And one is the person you know who called you a taxi when you needed to go to the hospital. And another the person who listened on the other end of the phone when you needed help.

What makes a saint is not total freedom from sin, but a life lived in devotion to God. We are called to imitate their virtues, but not necessarily to reproduce their actions.

Christians can rejoice, for we are called to be saints, and thus freed from the burden of heroism and the impossibility of being angels.

So, here at St Botolph's Church this afternoon, we're going to engage in the greatest gift we can give another person. Through baptism, we'll participate in the making of a new saint. Later today we will welcome William into the life of Christ and offer him the friendship of this community.

Through baptism, we make possible a life where each person might choose "not between good and evil, but between good and better".

Baptism is the riskiest venture anybody can undergo. Through it, each of us are given into the family of the church, in which water becomes thicker than blood. Through baptism our ethnicity, our heritage and our background are made secondary to our identity in Christ.

We know that life in Christ won't always be easy, but it will be full of hope because we trust that Christ will guide us to the springs of eternal life where, eventually, God will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

"Who, then, are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" These are God's people, the saints, whom Christ has called, through baptism, to participate in his life and feast at the divine banquet. They are us, and we have come from every tribe and tongue and nation to gather in his name.

Amen