

**A Sermon for All Saints Day, Sunday, 1<sup>st</sup> November 2020**  
**Revelation 7:2-12, Matthew 5:1-12, by Richard Bauckham**

I wonder how many people know the meaning of the word Hallowe'en. (I won't ask you to put your hands up if you do.) It really means the night before All Hallows. Just as Christmas Eve is the night before Christmas, so Hallow-even is the night before All Hallows, which means All Saints. Hallowe'en is the night before All Saints Day. But whereas Christmas Eve wouldn't be anything much without Christmas Day, most people have no idea that Hallowe'en has anything to do with All Saints. It's a pity. Hallowe'en in popular tradition conjures up darkness and the powers of the night: witches, spooks and evil spirits. But when the night passes, the light of All Saints dawns. We celebrate the power of goodness in the world. We recognize the way the light of God is reflected in the lives of those who give their lives to God and radiate his goodness in the world. It seems to me sad that our secular world has forgotten the light of All Saints as it revels in the darkness of Hallowe'en. Of course, I know that for most people Hallowe'en is just an occasion for fun, not fear, as it once was. It's trick or treat and pumpkins – a Disney-fied version. But it still rather saddens me that the celebration of darkness survives and the celebration of light and goodness is all but forgotten.

But who are “all the saints” we celebrate today? I started a sermon on All Saints Day once by saying that it's the day when we remember that all of us are saints. That's not the way we generally think of it, but it's what it would be if we took the word “saints” in the way the New Testament uses it. Paul addresses some of his letters to “all the saints in such-and-such a place” (“all the saints in Philippi” or “all the saints in Ephesus”). He means simply the church in that place. And that's how it's used throughout the New Testament: all Christians are saints. It doesn't mean that all those Christians were amazing examples of love and goodness, dauntingly different from the churches we know.

So we need to wonder what the word saint actually means. In the Bible it's also translated “holy.” The saints are the holy ones. But to say that all Christians are holy people probably doesn't sound any more credible to you than saying that we're all saints. Maybe the problem lies in our idea of what it means to be a saint or to be holy. Being holy doesn't primarily mean being good. It means dedicated to God, set apart for God, consecrated by God. The

emphasis lies on something God has done for us: he has chosen us and consecrated us to be his people. Christians are people dedicated to God because God has set us apart to be his people. To be what the New Testament calls saints is an extraordinary privilege and an extraordinary responsibility. We belong to God and so we must live as people who belong to God. And that's where goodness or what we think of as saintliness comes in.

The French novelist Albert Camus wrote a great novel called *The Plague*, which I guess has gained a lot of new readers this year. One of the central characters, Tarrou, is dedicated to relieving suffering in an apparently hopeless struggle against the plague that is ravaging the town. From disillusioning experience in his own life he's discovered how easy it is to collude with evil even when trying to change the world for the better. He's determined to all he can to avoid that collusion with evil. He wants to dedicate himself solely to helping the victims of evil, as he does during the plague. He says, "It comes to this: what interests me is learning to become a saint." To which his friend objects, "But you don't believe in God." "Exactly," he says. "Can one be a saint without God? – that's the problem, in fact the only problem, I'm up against today."

Can one be a saint without God? It must depend on how you define the word, but in the biblical and Christian sense of the word, no. By definition one cannot be a saint without God. There are good people who do not believe in God. Of course there are. There are real people like Tarrou, many of them working in our National Health Service this year. Thank God there are. But a saint is not primarily a good person. A saint is, in the first place, someone dedicated to God, someone whose goodness, such as it is, flows from that dedication to God. They are the people Jesus characterized in those extraordinary nine beatitudes with which he began the Sermon on the Mount. They are, if you look closely, the qualities of Jesus himself reflected in his people. Jesus was the man whose whole life was without qualification dedicated to God his Father. In the Gospels the demons call him "the Holy One of God." Interesting that, isn't it? The spirits of Hallowe'en, of darkness, recognize how utterly different from them Jesus is precisely because of his utter dedication to God. The holy one of God – God's original and perfect saint, we might say. His followers are saints, because God has made us in

Jesus Christ his own people, and at the same time we are called to be saints. It's our vocation.

In the Sermon on the Mount, just after the Beatitudes, Jesus says to the disciples: "You are the light of the world.... Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." Some of you will be familiar with those words from some of our Communion liturgies. That's the vocation of the saints, all of God's people. Their lives, individually and even more in their life together, should be a site of God's glory, such that other people are drawn to recognize and to praise God. Of course, Jesus doesn't mean that we should draw attention to ourselves: Look at us, aren't we wonderful, that's because we are dedicated to God. Rather the saints witness to God precisely because they are dedicated *God*, not preoccupied with themselves, forgetful of self, attending to others.

I think something that may help us at this point is think about the people we might call saints with a capital S. Not forgetting that we are all saints, the church has always recognised that there are people who shine so brightly with the light of Christ that we can all be inspired by them. In the early centuries they were especially the martyrs, because there were so many martyrs and the churches found it natural to want to commemorate them, keeping their names alive as it were, not letting the persecutors succeed in wiping them out. The passage we heard from Revelation was first written for Christians who, if they stayed faithful to God, might very well face having to give their lives for their faith. It is extraordinary how, when it speaks of an innumerable multitude of people from every tribe and nation and language, it reaches forwards to our own time. In the past century there have been more martyrs and from more numerous peoples and nations than ever before in the history of the church. They are in a sense the paradigm of dedication to God, literally following Jesus to the cross. And there they are, before the throne of God, inheriting the blessings that the Beatitudes promise to all the saints.

The martyrs have always inspired others but so also have so many other saints with a capital S. I don't only mean those who get to have St put in front of their names, like the people our churches are dedicated to. There is a problem with that. In the middle ages the church developed a system of officially recognizing saints and the Roman Catholic church still does that. You

may have noticed in recent years Mother Teresa and Johnnry Newman have been canonized. But the churches of the Reformation, including the Church of England, gave up canonizing people. That was because there were real problems about the way cults of the saints had developed in the middle ages. None of the Protestant churches officially recognize saints. So we might talk about St Francis of Assisi, but we don't talk about St John Bunyan or St William Wilberforce or St Dietrich Bonheoffer, for example. It looks like saints either have had to have lived a long time ago or to be Roman Catholics.

But here's something you may not know. The Church of England has a calendar. You can find it online, last updated 2010. It's full of commemorations of the people I'm calling saints with a capital S. So as well as the saints of the early church and the middle ages, there are lots of more modern people. It's wonderfully ecumenical: There's Thomas Cranmer, Thomas More, John Calvin, Martin Luther, John and Charles Wesley, John Bunyan, George Fox, John Henry Newman, Seraphim of Sarov. It's international - including for example, the martyrs of Japan, the martyrs of the Solomon Islands and the martyrs of Uganda. It's a great assortment of evangelists, social reformers, poets, spiritual writers, church leaders, hymn writers. Looking through it when I was thinking about this sermon, I found a few real surprises and quite a few names I had never heard. I don't really know who decides to put people into the calendar, but it does seem like these are people many Christians have widely recognized as people in whom the light of Christ has shone particularly brightly. They belong with many, many others of course in the great multitude that no one can count.

One of the great things about the saints with a capital S is how different they all are. They're different in personality, in vocation; they belong to many different cultures and social situations. They all have their failings and limitations. Yet they are all recognizably disciples of Jesus. They show us as it were Jesus reflected in many different ways in all the huge variety of human life and culture. That's partly how they can inspire us.

So I want to end with this recommendation: I think we should all have at least one favourite saint with a capital S. Someone who inspires us to greater dedication to God. Someone who opens up for us ways of being disciples of Jesus that suit our own situation or vocation or personality. Read a biography or two. Get to know your favourite saint. See what the Beatitudes mean in their life.