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All Saints – November 3 2019 BH.

Would you do me a favour please – would you just sit up as straight as you can and let me take a quick look at you?

No, I can't see a single halo amongst you.

You probably didn't expect me to, because haloes are something we tend to associate with saints and 'holy' people, and you probably no more see yourselves in that light (if you'll excuse the pun!) than I do myself.

Actually, haloes first began to appear in wall paintings about 200 years before the Christian era. They seem to have come from the Zoroastrian religion and appear to have been used to represent the idea of 'heavenly glory'. Once Christianity had got itself established we did what we usually do with other people's 'religious' ideas and 'Christianised' them. We're very good at that. We did it pretty well with the pagan Saturnalia and turned it into Christmas, 'though it looks as if Saturnalia is making a very successful comeback! We've Christianised Spring celebrations and turned them into Lent. We've even done it with the Jewish Scriptures (the Law, or books of Moses, the Writings and the Prophets) and turned them into the 'Old Testament', setting them into our Bible as preparations for the New Testament coming of Jesus as Messiah. We don't hang about!

I was surprised recently to discover that many of the painted haloes, particularly in the 15th century, were not round but square! There are also people who actually believe that haloes themselves do exist. One of them has publicly stated that they are "the bioenergetic field we all have around our bodies". If your bioenergy is as low as mine sometimes feels perhaps that's why I couldn't see any just now, square or otherwise.

But then none of us really thinks any longer of saints as people who merit haloes of holiness. When Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesian Christians we heard from earlier and thanked them for their love for 'all the saints' he wasn't thinking about people of special holiness or spirituality; he was thinking of the general run of Christians in various settings. He had already addressed his letter to 'the saints that are in Ephesus, who are faithful to Christ Jesus'.

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Indeed, several of his letters are addressed to ‘the saints’ in various places, and what he goes on to say about some of them makes it very clear that there was nothing special about many of them! No, saints are not special ‘haloed people’. As I’ve said before in these premises, Saints R’Us. You and me.

Fortunately, not many of us are as bizarre as some of the better-known ‘Saints’! I think of St. Simeon Stylites. Apparently he attached himself to a local church and spent time during the services blowing out candles and throwing nuts at the clergy! He also developed a theatrical limp; insisted on feasting on huge amounts of beans on fasting days, with predictable results; and on at least one occasion ran naked into the womens’ section of the public baths! He is, appropriately, the patron Saint of clowns. He’s best known, though, for apparently spending 37 years of his life sitting at the top of a pillar! As a contemporary poet put it:-

On top of a pillar Simeon sat; he wore no mantel, he had no hat;

But there, as a bird, sat night and day and hardly a word did Simon say.

And why did Simon sit like that, without a mantel, without a hat,

In a holy rage for the world to see?

It puzzles me, it puzzles many. A desert father?

And I think it puzzles the good Lord rather!

No, most of us saints are not quite as strange as Simeon Stylites. We may, though, be a bit more like St. Augustine; not so much in respect of his great learning and theological brainpower; more, perhaps, because of his sheer earthiness as witnessed by his famous prayer “Lord, make me chaste and continent – but not just yet!”

I was interested to note that the people who set our Bible readings have chosen, for the Gospel reading for today, an extract from what we call the ‘beatitudes’, but not from Matthew’s version called the ‘sermon on the mount’ but from Luke’s version, known as the ‘sermon on the plain’. Luke’s version begins with the phrase “Jesus looked up at his disciples and said...”. So Jesus

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looked at those whom Paul, in his letters, calls 'the saints', and what Jesus sees are people who are poor; people who are hungry; people who are unhappy; people who are disliked and isolated. I have to say that when I looked around when I began this sermon, not only did I not see much in the way of haloes, I also didn't see much in the way of poverty, or hunger; I may have seen a certain amount of unhappiness, but I didn't particularly notice people who are disliked or turned away and isolated. So perhaps Saints are not Us after all. Or, if we are, in what way do we qualify?

I like the way a clergyman in a church in Richmond put it. In comparing us with the better known saints, especially the ones who stand out for their heroism or their devout holiness, he put it like this; perhaps as I read it out you might like to listen out for anything which is some sort of picture of yourself.

"Our own individual ways of doing this are likely to be smaller scale, quieter and often unrecognised. But any act of helping someone along the journey of life, not least when life is hard going; any deed of making other people and their welfare – rather than our own – the centre of our focus; any willingness to take time to listen; any showing of understanding; any act of forgiveness; any seeking after reconciliation; any act of speaking up for those who cannot speak for themselves; any moves to establish peace and justice on even the smallest, local scale – in short, any act of love – is what makes a saint."

In however small a way, you are there; I am there; we are there; the grieving people whom we shall meet at the Service of Remembrance this afternoon are there; the people for whose loss they grieve are there. Saints R Us. We are part of that huge body of people who through the centuries, whatever their faith or background, have shown examples of that kind of love. We are not alone in this. We have all the encouragement and support we can ever need through being part of that vast fellowship. They are all around us; they are here in church with us now, haloes or no haloes; they are in the villages and schools and churches of Malawi, thinking of us, praying for us, encouraging and supporting us as we do them. They are in our families and friends, in those who have brought us to faith, in those we may never even meet who protect us and provide for us day by day.

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For all the saints, both those amongst whom we live and move and have our being, and those who from their labours rest, our thanks be to God.

Alleluia, amen.