

All Saints Sunday 2017

The key themes of All Saints: the bigness of the church; the victory of grace in people's lives; that the saints pray for us.

What's the point of today's feast? What practical difference does it make to your life that today we celebrate All Saints?

I think there are three key things.

Number one: All Saints reminds us of the sheer big-ness of the Christian Church. When we come here on a Sunday morning, it is not just the few of us gathered here. Not even the few of us gathered here and the other fews gathered in other places at the same time. We gather, as the reading from Revelation put it, as part of a great multitude drawn from every tribe and tongue, every race and nationality, spread out not just across the globe today but stretching back in time. That's why every time I say the Eucharistic Prayer, we have those words 'gather into your kingdom all who share this one bread and one cup, so that we, in the company of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St Alban, St Lawrence and all the saints may praise and glorify you forever'. We, in the company of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St Alban, St. Lawrence. Christian life isn't just me and Jesus. It isn't even just this church and Jesus: we worship with the whole company of heaven, we share our life with the whole company of heaven.

And why does that matter? Well, at one level simply because it stops us from being too narrow-minded and obsessed with the here and the now. I realise that here I begin to tip-toe into very controversial waters, and I know that these areas are complicated – but I think, for instance, of our current debates about same-sex relationships and same sex marriage. Now, whatever else might be said in that debate – and there is much! – *one* factor in it is the strong desire that many feel to bring the church up-to-date, to make it fit with modern culture, modern assumptions. That's not always a bad thing. But it's not always a good thing either. Even modern culture sometimes gets things badly, badly wrong. And one of the ways of not getting sucked too easily along by its flow is to remember that in fact we belong to a much bigger culture, the culture of the saints across time and space. We refuse to think that our brothers and sisters in the past were just stupid, just bigoted, just ill-informed. They're our brothers and sisters. It doesn't mean they were infallible; it does mean we at the least pay careful heed to what they thought. The dead get a vote in our discussions.

The second reason All Saints Day matters has to do with the double meaning of that word saint. In the New Testament, every Christian is called a saint – Paul starts his letters by addressing the saints in Corinth, or the saints in Ephesus. And we know that many of those people were not what we now tend to mean by saints – they were not people whose lives looked exceptionally holy, exceptionally filled with God and goodness. They were deeply flawed, broken people like you and me. Now, at one level we should absolutely insist that the New Testament is correct and that they, and you, and me are all saints – all called to holiness, all really destined for a share in the glory of God.

But at another level, it's no bad thing that the word saint came to mean something rather more unusual – namely a life which here and now was obviously, decisively, wonderfully transformed by grace. A life which people could point to and say with confidence: *there*, that's what it looks like when someone is caught up in Christ, made new by the Spirit. In most of our lives, the effect of grace is ambiguous, only half-started, still compromised by weakness and sin. *It is good* that there are some people we can look to where the victory at least seems definitive, accomplished. It is good that we know Jesus works – that lives have been utterly and wonderfully full of Him. They might be the great figures of church history – Benedict, Francis, Dominic, Wilberforce, Romero, Bonhoeffer. They might be figures known to us alone. But their very existence encourages us: if grace was real in them, it can be real in us. So All Saints Day is a feast of encouragement for the church.

And – here's the third great thing about All Saints - that encouragement is not just a matter of us looking back at their lives in admiration. We should think, rather, in terms of *them* looking at *our* lives and cheering us on. There's a very striking passage in the Letter to the Hebrews, not set for today but often read at All Saints services. It comes in Chapter 11, which runs through the most amazing series of heroes from Israel's past, the famous and the unknown. It recounts their great deeds, their awesome courage under savage persecution, it describes them as those 'of whom the world was not worthy'. And then, at the very climax, the writer says this: 'Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God provided something better so that they would not, without us, be made perfect.' *They would not, without us, be made perfect.*

That was true not just of the Old Testament heroes: it is true of Alban, Lawrence, Benedict, Francis, Wilberforce, Bonhoeffer and the rest of them. All those great Christians of the past: the famous ones and the unknown ones: the martyrs, the ones who built hospitals and schools, the ones who cared for the abandoned, the ones whom we gaze at and admire They will not, without us, be made perfect. As the Collect for today puts it, they are knit into one communion, one mystical body, with us. Their ultimate destiny, their final joy, involves us. And so now, in some strange sense, they *wait*: they wait for us, and they cheer us on – they surround us with their encouragement, their hope, their prayers. Right now, at this Eucharist, in some strange sense they are here, and willing us on to become ever more how Jesus wants us. So when you fail, when you feel flat, when you are tempted to surrender or despair – remember how you are surrounded by that great cloud of witnesses. Remember their prayers for you, their hopes for you. You are never alone. You are part of that great multitude, and together we will reach the promised land.

So now, with the Blessed Virgin Mary, Alban, Lawrence and all the saints, we give glory to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.