

All Saints Day 31 October 2010
St Lawrence Abbots Langley 9.30 am
All Saints/Stewardship sermon

When I was a boy my father taught me that there were four great feast days in the church's year. Three were connected with aspects of God; these were Christmas Day to celebrate the birth of our Saviour; Easter Day when we rejoice at the resurrection of our Lord, and Pentecost (or Whitsunday) when we recall the coming of the Holy Spirit. But the fourth great feast day of the year was about people – All Saints Day – and on each of these great feast days my father drank a glass of port after lunch. It is a tradition that I myself carry on – and I can thoroughly recommend it.

So today is the day when we give thanks to God for all the saints who through the ages have witnessed to their faith and you are surrounded by some of them here, looking down from these marvellous stained glass windows. It was the saints who were disciples to our Lord; saints who were the seeds of the early church and saints who despite much oppression and opposition spread the word of the gospel throughout the ancient world. It is the saints (like your own patron St. Lawrence who was martyred for his faith in Rome in 258) who have shaped our faith through their writings and example.

The reason why they did these marvellous things was because they wanted to proclaim the glory of God. They were passing on the message they had heard about the kingdom of God, about God's love and grace and forgiveness. Whether they realised it or not it was their faith that drove them on.

But they have now run their race and the baton has been passed to us. It is you and I, gathered here today – each one of us – who have the task and the responsibility to carry on their work. For without us, who will tell others of Christ? Who will tell our children and grandchildren? If we don't, then no-one else will. We have a unique heritage and we have a duty and a joy to be the standard bearer for our generation. So, three important things to remember and some things to do.

First, we are called to be saints – every single one of us here today is called by God to be a saint. Do not think of the saints of old as larger than life figures who never did any wrong and always led a charmed existence. Read the family tree at the beginning of St. Matthew's gospel and you will see that not all the ancestors of Jesus were pure as the driven snow – far from it. There was Jacob who cheated his brother Esau out of his inheritance; David who sent Uriah into battle and sudden death because he wanted his wife; and several others who blotted their copy book. All were ancestors of the Messiah Jesus Christ. Yet their sins were forgiven and they were used by God for his work: we remember them for the great things they did, not for their failures.

Whatever our failings, God will use each of us; God has called each of us to be a saint and to follow in the footsteps of those who have gone before us. He longs for us to be part of that mighty throng. Your name may not be mentioned in history

books but you will be known to God. Today is the opportunity for us to accept that challenge.

Second: prayer. Prayer is the one activity we can all do no matter how old or young we may be, no matter how religious we are. We cannot hope to be disciples of Christ, we cannot answer the call to be one of the saints, we cannot draw closer to God, without prayer. Prayer is the opportunity to be alone with God, to give thanks, to say sorry for what we have done wrong, to ask for guidance and to remember those in need.

It is a mistake to believe that we do not need help to live as a Christian. The temptations that surround all of us in so many ways cannot be faced alone. We desperately need God's help. We cannot hope to follow Christ without praying to God, without asking for his help and guidance and without acknowledging our shortcomings. Each of us needs to find a few minutes every day, to be quiet and listen to God. And gradually God will work through us and through others to show us the way.

Third, will we be ready for God's kingdom? We do not know the time or the hour but one day we will have to account for what we have done and what we have not done. When you fall in love with someone you want to grow closer to each other. You want to know everything you can about one another and you will want to spend time with them. We can only know and love God if we spend time with him. As Christians, we know the great commandment is to love God and to love our neighbour. We get to love God more by coming to church, to give thanks for our many blessings, to pray together and to worship him. And crucially, through the Eucharist we share in his body and blood. Every Sunday we should come to church to strengthen our faith and join with the worshipping community. If you normally come once a quarter, try coming every month; and if you come every month, try coming every week. Just as we can only stay alive if we have food and water so we can only keep spiritually alive if we come to church regularly and are fed with God's word and sacrament.

But there's more.

Being a practising Christian is not just about prayer and coming to church. That's fundamental. Part of our worship together goes on beyond our services. You have groups here concerned with numerous church activities and I am sure some of those will involve the local community. All of these groups need people to be involved in them and to run them. Don't be shy; get involved, they need you. We are all good at something. So we should all try to do something for the church in terms of our time and talents. Joining one or more of these groups (or indeed being involved with your Deanery or the Diocese) is all part and parcel of what we are about. It is all part of showing our love for God and for others.

The point is, the more we contribute, the more we use our talents for serving God and each other, the more we will reflect His glory and His love and the more we will draw closer to Him. Also, we need to enthuse others, we need to attract more

people to be disciples and we are the ones who are responsible for that – not just the Bishop, not just the Vicar (though they have important roles to play) but all of us who call ourselves Christians. When did you last ask a friend or neighbour to come to church with you?

This giving of our time and talents is all part of our stewardship of what God has given us and goes hand in hand with the stewardship of our money. Christian giving is an essential part of a fully rounded Christian disciple, just as much as prayer, or worship, or reading our Bible, or using our time and talents. It is part of what a Christian is – it should be ingrained in us - it's part of our DNA.

Our commitment to God, our response to His gifts, will manifest itself in our generosity to Him. But that generosity should be measured not by what we give, but what we keep back for ourselves. Perhaps like me, that makes you feel uncomfortable. That's the real challenge. Yet we cannot be too generous to a God who has given so much to us. Remember the story of the widow at the temple in the New Testament. She only gave a few coins yet it was all she had. She had nothing left: Jesus loved her for it but perhaps she was over generous. As Jesus sees what we give, would He think us generous?

Importantly, our giving should be proportionate. It should be in proportion to the amount we have and in proportion to what we spend on ourselves. For example, how does our weekly giving to the church compare with what we might spend on going out for a meal; or going to a football match; or to the cinema or theatre? Once we understand that giving should be proportionate then we need to ask, how much? Clearly, it's going to be different for different people.

It will vary according to our income. Some years ago, the General Synod suggested our aim should be to give 5% of take home pay to the church and 5% to other charities. So if you have net income after tax of £1,000 a month (and that's less than the average wage) 5% is £50 or £12.50 per week. For some, that would be too much – for others it would not be enough. But it could be a starting point. For some people, times are tough but very many of us are well off compared to say 10 years ago. Living standards have been rising and what we once viewed as luxuries are often now seen as necessities. As a matter of interest, the average level of giving in this diocese is far, far lower than it should be. In other places such as Bradford, Birmingham, Liverpool and Sheffield people give more from a smaller income; in other words they are far more generous. Of course, the Bible teaches us that we should give a tithe (i.e. a tenth) of our income back to God; and some (and not just the wealthy) do just that. For those on high incomes that should not be impossible. Even after giving a tithe, they ought still to have more than enough for their needs.

When you renew your pledge – or make your first one - whatever you decide to give has to be a priority – like the mortgage or the gas bill. It ought to be sacrificial and it is certainly more important than some of the ways in which we often spend our money. Do the sums, work out a weekly or monthly amount and stick to it. Let us remind ourselves that stewardship is not an appeal for fund raising. It is absolutely not about fund raising. We should give generously **because of our love for God**

and as a prayerful response to his love for us. That is absolutely fundamental. If you had a wealthy benefactor who offered to pay all the church expenses, you should still give generously because of our love for God and you would then see how much more could be done in the parish and beyond for the spread of the gospel and for the benefit of those in need. And if you are a taxpayer, do make your giving through gift aid because that enables the church to recoup some tax.

This year the Diocese expects to spend about £13 million. 87% of that budget goes to support the parochial clergy – that includes payment of the stipends, national insurance and pension contributions, keeping the parsonage houses in good repair and paying the council tax. It also includes the costs of training both before and after ordination. The annual cost of keeping a priest in post is about £47,000 if you include all the items I have referred to. The stipend content is less than half of that in case you thought the clergy were being well paid! The total parish share requested from all the parishes in the dioceses does not quite meet the total costs of maintaining our parochial clergy – we receive about 84% of our total income from parishes and the balance of what we spend comes from investment and Glebe income. We receive nothing from the Church Commissioners.

If we wish to maintain the parochial ministry in this diocese it is absolutely imperative that all parishes contribute in full to the parish share requested. Your parish, like my own, has a relatively high request for Parish share. That's because your parish (and mine) have relatively large congregations and are in areas better off than many others in the Diocese. We have been greatly blessed. So part of what you give goes towards helping those Parishes that are less well off and who, without our help, would not be able to have a priest. All parishes contribute according to their ability so that the gospel can be preached in all the towns and villages of the diocese irrespective of wealth. And that is one of the strengths of the Church of England. Thank you for your contribution which enables that to happen.

But just think of what more you could do here in Abbots Langley if everyone prayerfully reviewed their level of giving and how many more souls you could win for Christ. It's certainly entirely possible!

Prayer, Church going, using some of our time and talents for God and offering back some of our income for the spread of the gospel is all part of what it is to be a Christian. They are not options – they are part of what defines us as followers of Christ. He loved us so much, he gave his life for us – we should in turn show our love for him – and maybe it will be costly for us too.

Today is a glorious day of celebration. We recall the saints of old and remember that we are all called to be saints. For now, it is our duty and our joy to follow in their footsteps, to deepen our love of God and of his Son and to demonstrate that love by our church going and by using his gifts wisely; and to surround all of that in prayer. Then, with God's grace, our example and our discipleship will help and encourage others to see the glory of God and his eternal Kingdom.