

**Sermon to be preached at Holy Trinity at the Eucharist
for All Saints Sunday on 3 November 2019 at 10 am**

Isaiah 56 v.3-8

Luke 6 v.20-31

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Something happens when you walk alone through a city at dusk on a cold November evening. Your mind turns back to remember those who have walked with you on your life's journey. I have often walked across the centre of London through the Royal Parks, the great lungs of our capital. Such a walk I have done many times, beginning fifty years ago, when I worked in Soho and lived in Kensington. Night is falling and the parks are beautiful as the trees are silhouetted in their winter tracery against the failing light. I am not quite alone. My walk has a constant rhythm. My thoughts play around those fifty years and the many people who have shared my life. And once more, as has happened many times, I am aware that Christ is with me, and has been with me in the company of the many grace-filled people with whom I have shared my life.

This morning, as we celebrate the Festival of All Saints, we're not limited to those who have been officially canonised, or commemorated in the church calendar. They have their own particular days in the church year. 'All Saints' speaks of those who are not famous, those who are not remembered by everyone, but those whose lives and deeds have endured beyond their death. The list includes our own much loved departed, those who have lived and died within our own community of faith, our own families, our own circle of spiritual companions.

From the moment of our baptism we are all set fair for a saintly life through the grace of God. But we know how very difficult that goal is for most of us. We are not perfect. In truth, we know we are very flawed.

It doesn't take much reflection to remember how selfish we often are. Although, I am really good at convincing myself otherwise. Maybe you are as well. I like putting myself forward, and sometimes I am not too scrupulous about fair turns for others. I have lots of excellent reasons for not giving to a particular charity. I am really skilled at turning the flaps of my ears down when I am being told a story of need and hardship, even on a frosty night in the shelter of some grand building in the city of London. I want to succeed more than I care about others' success.

But we are aware that there are some of us, both living and long since dead, who have overcome much of this selfishness. We live in companionship with these saintly lives. Because of their holiness they are close to God and yet they also remain close to humanity whose nature they share. Some, only you will be able to name, because they were close to you and their sphere of life was circumscribed, but you will carry the image of them close to your hearts. Some will be more widely known and you will share the presence of them with many.

What is the enduring and shared quality and characteristic of these saintly lives? The answer lies, I believe, in the lives they lived in response to the great and enduring and radical truth of the gospel, especially the blessings and the woes Jesus proclaims to his disciples in the Sermon on the Plain which we have just heard read. These Beatitudes remind us, the faithful, that the powers of this world will not have the last word.

In a dramatic reversal of the customs of this world, Jesus foretells in our reading from Luke, the truth of the Kingdom of God:

Unsure of your direction in life? You're blessed.
Caught under the weight of grief and loss? You will be comforted.
Undervalued and not heard by those around you? God hears you.
And so on, right through the Blessings.

The truth of the Kingdom of God. A truth which makes no sense. A truth which turns the world upside down. Most assuredly not yet the way of the world, we know that, but breaking into our lives by the power of God's Holy Spirit. The most wonderful invitation to experience life and living anew.

The one thing that Jesus requires in his disciples is an emptiness that God can fill, a discontent with the world which will lead us to the wealth, the satisfaction, the consolation, the comradeship of the kingdom of God. This is the first characteristic of the new life, a complete reversal of the world's values. The second characteristic of the new life is love, a gracious, determined and active interest in the true welfare of others, which is not deterred even by hatred, cursing and abuse, not limited by calculation of deserts or results, but is based solely on the nature of God.

And that is why we remember and celebrate the deeply faithful saints of God's church through whom the glory of God has been revealed, who lived their life in the light of the Blessings, and followed Christ's injunction to turn the other cheek, and to do to others as you would have them do to you.

And in that remembering, we know, you and I, that we are called to be persons through whom the light of God's love shines. We are called to discover in others the image of God. For we know that many of the wonderful people we have known in our lives did indeed respond to God's call with a great fullness of heart, and a great sense of humility. We rejoice that God creates faith in people, and those people, through ordinary and extraordinary acts of love, the very heart of God, bring the Kingdom of God closer to Earth.

This is as true in the dark days as much, perhaps even more so, as in the days of peace and prosperity. I treasure the writings of the German theologian and pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote many inspiring letters from a Berlin prison in 1944/45. I would like to end by reading an extract from a meditation on Easter by this saintly man, who in the love of Christ gave his own life for others.

I want to give you this extract because it reveals the depths of Bonhoeffer's faith in Christ in the darkest of times.

Bonhoeffer wrote:

'We focus more on dying than on death. How we deal with dying is more important to us than how we conquer death. Learning to deal with dying, however, does not yet mean we have learned to deal with death. Overcoming dying occurs within the realm of human possibilities, while overcoming death means resurrection. It is not from the art of dying, but from the resurrection of Christ that a new, purifying breeze can blow into the present world.' Amen.