

Sermon preached at 10.00 am Sung Eucharist

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sunday 3 November 2019 – All Saints Sunday

There are four empty niches on the cathedral west front, originally intended for statues of saints. They are empty because, surprise, surprise, Christians do not always agree about what they believe! When this building was started, saints were a central part of church life. By the time the work finished, the Reformation was in full swing; saints were out of favour and their veneration deemed superstitious.

In medieval Christendom, saints had almost celebrity status. The Christian faith permeated every aspect of people's physical and mental worlds. The Faith owes its beginnings to Christ and his apostles, but it was the deeds, prayers and piety of local saints that shaped the places in which most people lived and from which they were unlikely to travel any distance, either physically or imaginatively. Churches dedicated to St. Edmund are mainly found in Eastern England. Without Edmund's martyrdom, our town would probably have

remained as the village of Bedericsworth; there would have been no abbey, no St Mary's and no cathedral. Heaven, where God is king, was the earthly realm made perfect and filled with angels and saints. On earth, kings were quite remote, and often despotic. For ordinary folk to meet or petition the king was something scarcely more likely than they would grow wings and fly. Rulers had to be approached in proper way; get it wrong and you might be beaten or imprisoned. We wouldn't go to court without professional help, so how much more necessary was it for people to approach Almighty God through a heavenly intermediary who had once lived locally and 'knew the ropes'. It was not surprising that local saints were often very much more real, and therefore more approachable in prayer, than the Apostles and the great saints who had lived long ago and far away. People would therefore pray for divine favours to their local saint.

The parish church or saint's shrine was the obvious place to go to approach a local saint, which put the clergy in a position of power, and power, as we know, tends to corrupt. Shrines and pilgrimages brought in large sums of money. By the time of the

Reformation, resentment against the whole practice of venerating saints had arisen. The reformers translated the Bible, and taught that everybody could approach God in prayer directly, because Jesus had died for them. The saints were seen as obstacles rather than intermediaries to encountering the Divine. Their statues were defaced or removed and shrines destroyed. Away too, went their feast days and a lot of public holidays. The English had to work harder and had less fun.

Whilst some Christians are still uncomfortable with any emphasis on the saints, the Church of England has always kept the feast days of the Apostles and those saints whose words and actions make up the New Testament. Since the 19th Century, in the catholic strand of the Anglican tradition, saints have come back into favour, as examples of godly living rather than heavenly intermediaries. New saints have emerged, whom like their predecessors, we commemorate annually. Their potted biographies, with prayers and associated Bible readings, can be found in a special lectionary called 'Exciting Holiness', which we use here at the cathedral at the weekday

morning Eucharist. Not all these modern saints are Anglicans: last month, we remembered St Theresa of Avila, a post-Reformation Catholic, Henry Martin, a Baptist translator of the scriptures and Martin Luther. Last month saints made the news when Pope Francis canonised Cardinal John Henry Newman. Anglicans had however already been commemorating him for some years, on August 11th!

All Saints Sunday will nevertheless pass most people by. Our individualistic and secular society applauds celebrities, but either treats saints with suspicion as fanatics or dismisses them as irrelevant. A hedonistic world finds many Saints unattractive: they were celibate and often heroically ascetic; few were married or raised families. To find what makes someone a saint, we need to look beyond the things in their lives that were specific to the culture, place and age they inhabited, and look for the qualities common to them all. God is eternally present in all creation, but whilst most of us either forget this and are so self-obsessed that we ignore the promptings of the Spirit, the saints listen. 'Praise to Holiest in the Height' is the common theme of all their varied lives.

Saints are filled with divine discontent, and never cease to hunger and thirst after righteousness. Today however, righteousness and holiness are words, loaded with overtones of self-righteousness. The expression 'holier than thou' comes to mind, and implies someone who spends his or her life burnishing their soul, and like the pharisee in the parable, judging others.

Matthew, before he encountered Jesus, was a tax-collector and therefore anathema to his fellow Jews. Like the tax-collector in the parable, he had little sense of self-worth. When Jesus met him, like every saint, he realised that Jesus fulfilled everything he really needed. The Beatitudes, which he records, describe those needs and the qualities that make someone saintly.

Saints are poor in spirit, because they have known forgiveness and that any worth or virtue they possess is not their own, but comes from God. They are therefore humble, and knowing their own failings, merciful. By contrast, many people confuse arrogance and a talent for self-promotion with real ability and

are ready to blame and shame everyone but themselves. Cruelty, oppression, complacency and indifference to the suffering of others makes the saints mourn, but they don't just wring their hands, they relieve suffering and make peace. Rather than accepting the sort of fudges and uneasy truces that pass for peace in our public life, they confront the root causes of conflict.

The Beatitudes of course, describe Christ's character; to imitate Christ means facing crucifixion. One blessing God withholds from the saints is an easy life. The cruel and those who dominate and exploit others do not like being made to view their actions in the mirror of sanctity. It is no coincidence that so many of the saints were also martyrs. Christians sadly continue to suffer and die for their faith and nearly every day. The Roman Catholic Church 'fast tracks' the martyr's journey to canonisation without needing any supporting miracles: to lay down one's life is miracle enough.

All saints, whether or not they are martyred, struggle. Saint John Henry Newman had a conversion experience in his youth,

but came to realise that his faith needed external validation, if it was not to become self-centred. He first sought this in the more traditional catholic way of belief then developing in the Church of England and helped to found the Oxford Movement. In his forties, Newman came to believe that in order to be true to these catholic principles, he had to become a Roman Catholic. His conversion did not bring instant happiness, it cost him his living of church Christ Church and fellowship of Oriel College in Oxford, his reputation and many friends. He found it hard to settle down in Roman Catholicism, and describes his struggles in his 'Apologia pro Vita Sua'. In the hymn 'Lead Kindly Light' he speaks of the night being dark and feeling far from home.

The early church celebrated All Saints Day on the first Sunday after Pentecost, probably because the lives of the Saints were a logical continuation of the events recorded in the gospels. Their lives embodied Our Lord's teaching and demonstrated to a sceptical and often hostile world that what the Church taught, and what its members believed, really did work. As we reflect on our own spiritual journeys, we may come to realise

that we are here, in part, because we have been fortunate to come across some remarkable people, where the Christian gospel really worked. Their exemplary, but generally unsung lives and selfless concern for us encouraged us to find out and sample what inspired them. More people have come to faith by encountering a saint than by hearing sermons, studying theology or reading scripture. Such saints are generally known only to God, but they make the world go round, and prevent it from falling into chaos and destruction. The secular world doesn't know it, but it needs saints like nothing else. They aren't going to come from anywhere else but from amongst us. The Church's core business is saint-making. We are sinners, but are made for sanctity. In the Eucharist we get food for the journey to our true destiny, as in the Communion of the Saints, we are caught up into the 'multitude which no one can number'.

*James Knowles
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