

Sunday 5th November 2023
All Saints' Sunday (A)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Revelation 7.9-17

NT: I John 3.1-3

Gp: Matthew 5.1-12

One of the potential criticisms of a Christian upbringing is that it can be quite boring to be good all the time. Some of you will know my particular aversion to the line from that Christmas carol which says, "Christian children all must be mild, obedient, good as he." Children who are good all the time do, I think, miss out on so much. I always used to say to my own children as they went off to school that if they hadn't broken a rule by lunchtime then they still had the afternoon ahead of them. Even if it amounts merely to walking the wrong way down a one-way corridor, school rules are inherently there to be disobeyed. It is the first lesson on how to speak truth to power. The equation between religion and being good is relatively recent, but even before the Christian era there were some tropes which are in common with Christianity.

Perhaps most significant is the need for creation narratives and founding mythologies. This is understandable and speaks to a human desire for knowledge of origins. Contrary to scientific understanding of an absence of existence before the Big Bang, most creation narratives are predicated on a divine existence before the creation of the world. Christianity summarises this famously as, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being." But in the book Genesis there are also ideas of chaos, when it says, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." This is also the Ancient Greek belief, that there was chaos out of which came night, and they created the earth. Or we can look to the ancient Egyptians, where Atum arose out of the primaeval waters and, in effect, created himself. Chaos and primaeval waters crop up as well in Mesopotamian creation myths, which possibly pre-date the rest.

Creation narratives all appear to be linked, but there are other aspects which speak to human need. The divine framework of Greek and Roman gods was complex and had a world of Olympians which

mirrored life on earth. All the activities which humans are so good at seem to appear amongst the gods, by which I mean love, treachery, infidelity, jealousy, greed, and that sort of thing. Roman and Greek morality was defined, but not analogous with the good / evil dichotomy of the Judeo-Christian world. It would therefore be wrong to say that the Greek and Roman gods were 'role models', but they were a pantheon of models of human behaviour. We cannot know, but I do wonder if Roman children, confronted with some misdemeanour, would have said, "But this is what Mars did" or "This is what Juno did."

All Saints' Day is a collective approach to the individuals we celebrate and commemorate throughout the year. Some lived exemplary lives; some died a martyr's death; some just picked up the pre-nominal 'saint' before their names because they were in the right place at the right time. Depending on your religious tradition, you might see the saints as role models, or you might see them as the focus of prayer so that they can intervene with the Father on your behalf. Or you might deny their existence altogether. If you look at Giulio Romano's incredible fifteenth century frescoes of the Roman gods in the Sala dei Giganti in the Palazzo del Tè in Mantua then you won't get something conceptually that different from Michaelangelo's slightly later fresco of the *Last Judgement* in the Sistine Chapel. I do encourage you to have a look at Google images later to see what I mean.

All of which makes me wonder whether the saints are there to meet our need, or are they there as part of God's Kingdom in heaven. Saints are, I think, part of the eschatological conundrum because they appear to us to be redeemed and separated from us, and yet our own redemption makes us equal with them. If they are a role model, then is it for us to achieve salvation by works or by faith, and yet no one can replicate the faith of another. The intercession of saints, though, is important both as a popular devotion (and you can see the relative popularity of different saints by the number of candles burning in front of them – both in this church and in churches across the world) and also because the intercession of saints is an important statement of belief in life after death. Christians often find it difficult to articulate what we shall be like after we die, after we have overcome the last enemy, but the strong belief in the continuity of individual identity and existence is proclaimed in people's insistence that the saints can intercede for us. Saints are perhaps role models but also a statement of belief in the central tenets of Christianity. This is summed up in our reading this morning from the First Letter of John, "We

are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure." The saints are pure and purified, and they are like God because they see him as he is.

At the start I referred to creation narratives but also foundation mythologies, and these foundation mythologies explain how things are what they are. One of the most famous foundation myths is that of the founding of Rome by Romulus and Remus, but the Romans were far more creative than that, because they deified their emperors to create validation for political and cultural events. Julius Caesar was deified two years after his death, and his nephew Octavian initially took the name Julius Caesar as the beneficiary of Caesar's will. He later proclaimed himself Augustus and he was in turn deified. His heir, Tiberius, had the name Tiberius Julius Caesar Augustus. You get the general idea. These deifications were not analogous to the canonisation of the saints, but they told a story, just as the saints tell us a story. You cannot expect everyone to read and understand the developments in theological thinking in all ages in the last two thousand years, and even today when literacy levels are generally higher than ever we don't expect everyone to read the Bible, but the saints tell us a story, and – like the Roman gods – they validate belief. If you ignore the saints then you become subject to a proclamation of the faith which rests on the ability of the story teller or the preacher. The saints tell us more about Christianity than any sermon can ever do.

And if you have been wondering when I am going to mention this morning's Gospel reading, then it is now, because this is the story which the saints are telling: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." This passage from the Sermon on the Mount is often held up as Jesus' great summary of his teaching, and although none of us was there on the mountain to hear Jesus speaking, we have heard these words in the lives of the saints. They are not role models, but they are preachers, telling us the truth about God, and showing us the reality of ourselves.

Fr Crispin Pailing