

Sunday 3 November 2024
All Saints

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Wisdom 3:1-9

NT: Revelation 21:1-6a

Gp: John 11:32-44

Amongst the many liturgical resources available to the modern Anglican churches of the British Isles is a small red tome which, on its pages, are set a daily remembrance of the work of the holy spirit in womens and mens lives over countless generations “Exciting Holiness”

"The celebration of the Holy Spirit
at work in many different ways
in the lives of Christian men and women
down the ages,
whose examples excite us to holiness,
is a sign of the great cloud of witnesses
with which we are surrounded."

Reads the frontispiece each name remembered through collects and readings that mark the festivals and lesser festivals of the church calendar. Lives, which as Exciting Holiness tells us, for All Saints Day, which we celebrate today, have been recognised by the Church “as its foundation stones, those heroes of the faith whose lives have excited others to holiness and have assumed a communion between the Church on earth and the Church in heaven”.

How did the custom of keeping special days for the ‘saints’ originate? Well, it originally started in the early days of the church, within the Roman Empire, when many Christians were giving up their lives for publicly professing their faith.

Later the term ‘martyr’, or ‘witness’, came to be applied not just to those who had died publicly for their faith, but to others who had taken significant risks, or shown heroic virtue, in being followers of Jesus Christ. Thus, a more general concept of sainthood came into being.

We’re all called to bear witness to our faith by our lives, and to enter the company of saints, and riskiness – upside-down living – is an important aspect of that. If we just take some instances of famous, recognised saints as points of illustrations, we see that they were people who took risks for the sake of love – love of God, and love of neighbour, going beyond what is reasonable, and very often paying a huge price either through their death, or within this life.

An early Christian saint and martyr was St Laurence, a deacon in the church at Rome in the third century. At a time of severe persecution, he was hauled before the authorities who demanded him to produce for them the church’s presumed treasures. It was the deacon’s

task to look after the material possessions of the church, largely in order to care for the poor. What did Laurence do? He went and gathered the poor people whom he served and said to the magistrates, 'look, here are the church's treasures' – which I'm sure he truly believed. But he paid the price of what looked like a piece of insolence with his life.

St Francis of Assisi in the 12th century; first response to God's call came when he was moved to embrace a leper and then went to live among the lepers of the district to serve them – surely a risky thing to do.

In the twentieth century, Oscar Romero in El Salvador, could have followed his earlier path of being quite a conservative priest, not criticising the government – but when he became Archbishop of San Salvador, events propelled him in another direction, as a sharp critic of the military regime, its robbing of the poor, and its notorious death squads. In the end, one of those squads killed him. You can think of many more saints, famous and unknown to the wider world, I'm sure. But in all of them, holiness had something to do with risk-taking, the risk-taking of living by the reversed, contra world thinking of the Kingdom of God.

But stop for a moment. Are the examples I have given of those whom we consider really taken risks in their lives? They may have done so if you consider the world only in human terms. A consideration of the readings this morning may change your view.

The book of Wisdom, attributed to Solomon, speaks of the immortality given as a gift by God to the righteous of the faithful abiding with God in Love. How wonderful and reassuring to think of the soul resting in the hand of God. In the book of Revelation, we have the image of God dwelling with us in a new heaven and a new earth wiping away tears, destroying death and putting an end to mourning and crying and pain. And how do we know that to be true? We have the word of God, the Alpha and Omega, the first and last. The Kingdom of God coming into being overturning norms by creating the new norms of radical transformation, re-establishing creation as always intended by God.

John chapter 11 verse 35 provides the shortest verse in the bible, depending on the version, 'Jesus wept' or in the NRSV which we use slightly longer 'Jesus began to weep'. Jesus, Son of God, weeping at the grave of a friend. A human response from a God who chooses to dwell with us, to abide with us. John chooses in his description of the raising to life of Lazarus to show us the humanity of Jesus and the power of God, the power of life over death. John uses words that reflect the words we see in the book of Wisdom 'Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God', 'Those who trust in him will understand truth'.

All three readings give the assurance that those who have taken risks for God are living within the kingdom, living counter to the accepted ways of the world.

In celebrating All Saints, we celebrate all who have lived lives of Exciting Holiness, lives that have been lived following the values of the kingdom of God. We are called to live lives that also follow those values of the kingdom. We're all called to live as saints; but living as saints is not to live a life apart from the world, rather it is to live a life in the world but assured that in all that we do God is with us.

Might there be some risk God asks you to take for him this week? A risk to your reputation, your purse; a risk to your time, a risk of being asked for more than you would really like to give, or even a risk to easy relationships with others.

Saints are remembered as those who put their heads above the parapet for the sake of God's kingdom of love and justice. Will we recognise when the challenge comes? And if we recognise the challenge do we acknowledge the changes that are needed in the world and do we want the world to change around us? Then we need to ask a harder question: "Do we want to change?"

On this All Saints Sunday, Jesus is offering to empower us to be saints, bringing hope to a troubled world. We have the opportunity to make a difference, to participate in Jesus' mission to turn the world upside down.

It comes down to the question: Do we want to change? I suppose the answer to that depends on what kind of world we want to live in.

Fr Bill Addy