

2023-11-05 ... 6.30pm All Saints Evensong Sermon ... Canon William Price

Today we are celebrating All Saints' Day. All Saints' Day is usually 1 November, but we are permitted to transfer the feast to the following Sunday, which would otherwise be the Fourth Sunday before Advent.

Let's begin by defining the word saint. It derives from the Latin *sanctus* and means holy. In French *saint* is the usual word for holy, but in English, a language which is a mixture of Romance and Teutonic, our word *holy* is related to the German *heilige*. So a saint is a person imbued with holiness, a follower of God, or perhaps, in a phrase which occurred to me yesterday a friend of Jesus. There is a short piece which is sometimes used in the Eucharist, just before the giving of Communion, '*Holy things for holy people*'. Saints are holy people, people of God. And in a wider sense St Paul addresses his letters to those called to be saints in Rome, in Corinth, and so on, all Christian people in those little congregations around Asia Minor and the Mediterranean.

Today we give thanks for all saints. The word saint probably conjures up the idea of the canonized saints, individuals who are addressed as saints. We might think of St Peter or St John or St Mary Magdalene, close friends of Jesus in the New Testament. Pre-eminent is Mary, chosen by God to be the mother of his son. She is called St Mary in the dedication of churches, like Whixall and Edstaston, although usually she is known as the Blessed Virgin Mary or Our Lady. And there are many later saints, like St Patrick, St David, and St George. Our own patron saint, St Alkmund, is an English saint, like St Chad, the first Bishop of Lichfield, and St Werburgh, Abbess of Chester. There are hundreds of named saints, as it were.

But they are not all the saints. There were so many people of holiness whose faith is known to God alone. God still inspires people today, and I'm sure that you can think of people you've known or whom you know today who have helped you in your Christian pilgrimages through life – parents, teachers, clergy, friends. And it surely those whom we should give thanks to God for today, rather than those who bear the title saint, for those known by the title saint each have a special day on which to remember them.

Our first reading tonight is, as Garry said, poignant in the circumstances of Jerusalem at this present time. But it is a vision towards the end of the Book of Isaiah in which the prophet pictures a new heaven and a new earth and Jerusalem is full of joy, in peace and prosperity. Pray for Jerusalem today and pray that God will bless the holy city. I think that we might also see this beautiful vision as a picture of heaven, the ultimate home of all God's saints.

Our second lesson came from the Letter to the Hebrews. The King James Bible calls it The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews, but it is almost universally accepted that it was not written by St Paul. This is no new thought. One Christian thinker Origen, wrote in the 200s AD that 'only God knows who wrote it'. The letter doesn't begin with the usual greetings and the final conclusion seems very short and certainly not in St Paul's style. My own feeling, for what it's worth is that what we call a letter, or epistle, is actually a sermon. Quotations from the psalms are exactly what a preacher might include to strengthen his argument, and at one point the author says that he hasn't got time to go into more detail. In a letter he might have written that he hadn't got space to go into more detail, space being so important when writing on expensive papyrus. If it was a sermon the author might have worried about the congregation getting restive if he went on much longer. But that's only my guess. What matters is not whether it was a letter or sermon. What matters is what it said.

In chapter 11 the author introduces the subject of faith. He defines faith as 'the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen'. Then follow examples of people who had **PTO**

faith, trust, in God – Abel (murdered by his brother Cain), Enoch (into heaven without death), Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Rahab (the prostitute who helped the spies in Jericho). And, because he hasn't time to talk at such length about other people of faith, he merely mentions Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, King David, Samuel, and finally, not mentioning any names, the prophets.

Then he lists the achievements of those who had faith in God and their sufferings – being tortured, mocked, scourged, imprisoned, stoned, sawn in two, killed with the sword – and destitute, afflicted, ill-treated, driven from their homes, and living in caves.

These were all people in the Old Testament. The author says that they were faithful to God, but they had not yet received their reward because God had a better plan for Christians. The faith of the Old Testament believers and the faith of the new Christians would come together to make one completed whole. The lives of faith of the Old Testament believers would not be complete apart from the lives of Christian believers.

And as Christians remember and consider all those great examples of faith in the Old Testament – *'so great a cloud of witnesses'* – Christians must in their turn lay aside sin and run the race set before them (or us) us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who endured the Cross and the shame, and who is seated at the right hand of God.

I like that reference to the great cloud of witnesses, all those who through the centuries have been faithful to God, have been friends of Jesus, have been saints. It can be a great help to us to reflect on the lives of the saints, especially at times when we might feel discouraged. Thank God for all his saints on earth and in heaven, the Communion of Saints as we say in the Creed. Give thanks for the wonderful hope that we have, each one of us, to be one day with the saints in heaven to worship God for ever.

Blessed be God in his angels and in his saints.

William Price