

All Saints Day Sermon

Today is All Saints Day and I have been thinking a little about what that means and just maybe if I might apply for the role!. I wondered if this might be something to aspire to when I finally retire! First of all how do you become a saint? Once I started looking into it, I quickly discovered that this might not be as easy as I thought! It's not just a case of being a good person, of doing good, according to the Roman Catholic Church, the process is much more complicated. First of all you need to be dead! There then has to be a five year gap to give time for grieving and all attachment and emotions to enable a rational decision to be made. Following that, if you are to be canonised as a saint you need to have completed at least one miracle in your life. Only then can the Pope proclaim you are a saint. There are a few exceptions to this strict process, but I don't think I am going to be one of those exceptions! I'm beginning to think that I might be better off to find some different retirement aspirations! Perhaps I'll take up golf!

If you look up the list of 'Saints' over time, it makes interesting reading. There are of course the saints we read of in the bible, usually those associated with Jesus. Throughout history the list is long and I wondered what virtues they had that would make them classified as a saint? Some of them have amazing stories to tell- St Francis of Assisi- and his love for nature, St Bernadette, who is said to have had many miracles and visions of Christ. And then of course there are saints such as Columba who sailed to the tiny Scottish island of Iona and from his legacy Celtic Christianity spread. So many marvellous stories and these people need to be recognised in the church. There are a few very odd stories, such as the story of St Margaret of Antioch, who angered her father so much by becoming a Christian that she was thrown into jail and whilst there she allegedly met the devil in the form of a dragon who swallowed her up whole. The cross she carried irritated the dragons belly and she was able to escape the dragon whole and alive! She is now known as the patron saint of childbirth! Wow!

None of this sounds very 'Methodist' and I was interested to understand more about the Methodist theology of saints. What should we, the Methodist people believe about saints? From my research I found that in the articles of faith of the Methodist people, John Wesley had very strong views: 'worshiping, and adoration, as well of images as of relics, and also invocation of saints, is a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warrant of Scripture, but repugnant to the Word of God.'

That is pretty strong stuff! But then I looked further and found that All Saints Day was one of John Wesley's favourite days. He calls it "a festival I truly love." On the same day in 1788, he writes, "I always find this a comfortable day." The following year he calls it "a day that I peculiarly love."

For Wesley we should not worship or venerate the saints, all of this worship should be saved for Christ himself. But he also advises people not to ignore the saints altogether, for they are examples of Christ centred people. So essentially Wesley says 'don't worship them, learn from them'

The final process of becoming a saint within the Roman Catholic Church is called 'beatification' or being made 'blessed' and this is where it all begins to make sense with our gospel reading for today. We heard a list of what it means to be 'blessed' and what in my view is what sainthood is really about. We have heard this so many times, but I am offering a different version to help us think:

Blessed are the poor...
not the penniless
but whose whose heart is free.

Blessed are those who mourn...
not those who whimper
but those who raise their voices.

Blessed are the meek...
not the soft
but those who are patient and tolerant.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst
for justice...
not those who whine
but those who struggle.

Blessed are the merciful...
not those who forget
but those who forgive.

Blessed are the pure in heart...
not those who act like angels
but those whose life is transparent.

Blessed are the peacemakers...
not those who shun conflict
but those who face it squarely.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for justice...
not because they suffer
but because they love.

We have much to learn from the poor, from those who mourn, those who strive for justice. We have so much to learn from all these people, but I am still not sure what the link is between being blessed and being a saint.

In the letter to the Romans (1.7) Paul addresses his 'audience':

⁷To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

And that it explains it all to me, we are all called to be saints, if we are 'God's beloved'. So when we think about All Saints Day we are reconnecting with not just with those here on earth who seek to spread God's good news, but also with all those who have 'gone to glory'. No wonder John Wesley described it as 'a most comfortable day'! So be blessed and remember that you don't have to strive for this, you are already blessed in God's eyes. But more than this we join with all those who have gone before us singing 'Beautiful Saviour Wonderful Counsellor
Clothed in majesty Lord of history'

There is one more thing. Charles Wesley, the great hymn writer and brother of John Wesley gives us a lovely image of the church through the ages:

Come, let us join our friends above
who have obtained the prize,
and on the eagle wings of love
to joys celestial rise.
Let saints on earth unite to sing
with those to glory gone,
for all the servants of our King
in earth and heaven are one.

All Saints day is also a time to remember those who have helped us on our journey as followers of Christ. Traditionally it is a time to give thanks for those in the local church, but today in a moment of reflection you are invited to take time to think of those people who have influenced you in the faith.

So 'Let saints on earth unite to sing with those to glory gone' and know that as we do so we are truly comforted and blessed.

Amen