

Holy Trinity Headington Quarry 2/11/08 10.00am
All Saints
Revelation 7:9-17; Matthew 5:1-12

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

The beginning of the twelfth chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

For me, the feast of All Saints is summed up in that phrase "a cloud of witnesses". It's not dissimilar to the vision we heard in today's first reading from the Book of Revelation, of "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne" of God. When I was younger, I assumed that All Saints was a feast of convenience: once the Church had proclaimed more than 365 people as saints, there wouldn't be enough saint's days left to go round, so everyone else would have to make do with being lumped together on 1st November...! (Of course, I now know that saints are commemorated on the day of their death, so there never was a council of clergy sitting there discussing whether St John the Evangelist would be OK on 27th December or whether he'd prefer some time in May, so as not to clash with Christmas.)

But to think in this way is to miss some of the important details in that reading from Revelation. If we restrict All Saints to those who have been officially canonized by the Church, then there will be an awful lot of them (more by the year, given the enthusiasm of recent popes), but we would at least in theory be able to work out how many there are. In the vision, however, we heard of "a great multitude that no one could count", which is significant. What is more, notice how the narrator refuses to speculate on who these people are: you'd have thought that St John the Divine (who was pretty confident in deciding whether a particular congregation was hot, cold or lukewarm) might have had some idea of what a saint was, yet when the elder asks him "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?", he replies, "Sir, you are the one who knows" - the equivalent of "You tell me."

So this vision of the saints in heaven warns us that we should not be too precise when it comes to identifying who is a saint, or how many of them there are. We mislead ourselves if we think that **we** can define sanctity or sainthood. Yes, there may be recognized processes developed by the Church to decide whether someone should be declared a saint, but that is all it does. They are *declared* a saint; the Church doesn't **make** them a saint, but simply recognises within them the characteristics of saintliness which they already have. Truly has it been said that there are far more saints around the throne of God than have been officially declared by the Church, or even recognised by their contemporaries.

Furthermore, the characteristics of saintliness among those who have been admitted to this canon are pretty diverse. I remember a preacher once pointing out that a saint would be a very difficult person to live with. The very first one was John the Baptist, clad in animal skins, eating locusts and wild honey and verbally abusing the religious authorities. (That's quite some start!) Then there are the monks of the desert, such as Simeon Stylites, living on a pillar for years in order to mortify their bodies and get away from the rest of sinful humanity. There are those bold Northern saints, Aidan and Cuthbert among them, setting out on preaching journeys for months at a time, tramping through the muddy bogs from settlement to settlement, determined to visit as many smoky hovels as possible. There are the theologians like Augustine, writing prolific letters and treatises, but racked by self-obsessive guilt over their personal lives. There are the mystics like Teresa of Avila, shunted from convent to convent because of her difficult relationship with ecclesiastical authority, not to mention her passing in and out of consciousness during church services.

In fact, the closer one looks at the lives of the saints, the more information we have, the more they come across as human. Yes, they made some difficult decisions, yes they displayed extraordinary feats of endurance and showed remarkable singlemindedness and commitment, but they were not a race of giants who once roamed the earth and whose like is not known in our generation. They were men and women of their time who were conspicuous for the way in which they made God known. The true saint points not to themselves - and indeed, if you read any of the autobiographical material written by those I have just mentioned, they were painfully aware of their own inadequacies and shortcomings. The true saint points to God. We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses in order that we may "run with perseverance the race that is set before us, *looking to Jesus*, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

Who, then, are the saints of our day? St Paul, of course, addresses all Christians as saints, literally 'holy people', as he writes "to the church of God which is at Corinth with all the saints who are throughout Achaia" or "to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae." I suspect that we might be uncomfortable with this description - although I could be wrong: who knows? Are there any saints here this morning: have you come specially for All Saint's Day...? Are you the *ἅγιοι*, the holy ones of Headington Quarry, who number among God's chosen people in the Diocese of Oxford...? Well, *I* believe that you are holy, all of you. Because what makes you holy is the same God who makes his other saints holy. Holiness is not a physical characteristic or a personal quality like being shortsighted or talkative, growing a halo and going about in a pious manner. Holiness, in fact, is more likely to be the antithesis of such attributes, in that it describes not ourselves, but God: the God who breaks through in order to transform us, and the world around us, to be holy as he is holy, to reflect the glory we find in him. Remember how the process of declaring a saint depends on recognizing the characteristics of saintliness already present in someone's life, not those attributed by the sentimental myths of later hagiography.

So, if we are part of the Communion of Saints, then we are a Church in which God is present and makes himself known *to* his faithful people and *through* his faithful people in each generation. That continuity is the hallmark of our celebration of All Saints and All Souls, when we remember with gratitude all those gone before who have known God and who have made God known. Each of us can point to individuals who have been influential on our journey of faith, whether they are famous saints admitted to the canon long ago, or those whose faithfulness has more recently shown us something of the mystery of God. Perhaps they were aware of it; perhaps they were not, but were nonetheless sufficiently open to God that he could speak to us through them. This is the cloud of witnesses, which we cannot grasp or count, but which surrounds us as, like them, we follow Christ, pointing not to ourselves but to him in order that we and this whole world may be transformed by his holiness and so prepared for the glory of the kingdom which his saints enjoy in heaven.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.