

All Saints' Day

In my *Curate's Corner* (in last month's parish magazine) I reflected briefly on sainthood, and the fact that (as well as the countless host of saints past '*who from their labours rest*') we actually live among saints here on earth ...

The kind of ordinary folk who are spoken of in this morning's Gospel passage who Jesus says are '*blessed*'.

Not those who are conventionally thought to be fortunate in having great wealth, influence and power—but those (whoever they are) who hear, understand and embody the way Christ wants us to live here on earth, and are promised an eternal inheritance ... '*for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*'

As we observe this Feast of *All Saints*, we can survey a long line of saints who have been formally named in the Church's calendar. Among them we can find a variety of people (women, men and even children) of an amazing range and diversity: all sorts and nationalities and conditions and, therefore, we can be tremendously encouraged. They trod the earth as we do, and are a source of hope and inspiration for us all. We who feebly struggle—while they in glory shine.

So as we consider the lives of those saints (both named and unnamed) what do they have to say to us—we—the saints here and now, living our lives in twenty-century Oldham?

If there is one thing writ large in the lives of the saints, it is that they came (at the deepest level) to know their need of God, and this is, I think, the very heart of the matter, not only for *them*, but also for *us* ... for Christians of *every* age ... that we come to recognise our own ***deep need of God.***

As Psalm 42 says—'*As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.*' The image of a soul thirsting for God resonates very deeply and physically. We all know what it is to experience a raging thirst—and to long for a cool drink to quench it. Without water we die physically; without God, we die spiritually.

You don't need me to tell you that we are living in challenging times. We are beset by threats to our freedoms and our very lives. We are living in world of fragmentation and conflict, where insecurities, confusions and deep anxieties abound. We are living at a time where is much fear about the future ...

- The rise of the far right at home and abroad ...
- Very recent and continuing terrorist atrocities ...
- Natural disasters, and those caused by human greed and carelessness ...
- Lack of care, concern and remedy for those in the world who are most vulnerable ...
- And of course, the deadly Coronavirus pandemic that is sweeping the planet ...

So, we wonder (indeed as many throughout the ages have wondered) where is it all going?

In the lives of the Saints we have sure signposts for the Church—for us as the body of Christ—in the present and into the future. They speak to us from the past, but not a past which is over and done with.

In God's economy the Church encompasses and embraces the whole company of the faithful in heaven **and** on earth.

Life today is to be lived and understood in the context of life eternal; that vision of heaven spoken about in our first reading from Revelation ... words of enormous comfort as we remember those we love and see no more in our Commemoration of the Faithful Departed this afternoon and tomorrow on All Souls' Day:

*'... They hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them ... nor any scorching heat;
... the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life ... and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'*

But this vision is to be understood as a larger, more inclusive, and *bigger* picture which draws out the past into the present; which gives us the **courage and confidence** to move ahead into the future.

The saints are no mere past heroes, but our sisters and brothers: they are here with us on the way—alongside us as companions and guides—guiding us by their examples.

The real challenge in all this, is to see **ourselves** as part of that 'communion of saints' ... referred to in the Apostles Creed.

To continue the lifelong learning that is a vital dimension of Christian discipleship. *'What do I actually believe ... and why? (and most important of all), what **difference** does it make to my life? How does it affect my decisions; my friendships and relationships; my giving of time, talents and resources? How does my deep **need** of God infuse every aspect of my life, and my desire to live with the saints in His eternal presence?'*

As we come to the end of our Eucharist this morning, we will say together that powerful post-communion collect in which we offer to God '*... our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice.*' We ask—'*Send us out in the power of your Spirit, to live and work to your praise and glory.*' And our final commitment is to '*Go in peace to love and serve the Lord*' ... to go with confidence and joy in the name of the risen and living Lord Jesus Christ. To live our lives in **his** risen life surrounded by the saints—that great cloud of witnesses.

As we say these prayerful words this morning, let us hear them anew, and take them with us to reflect on in the coming days.

As the '*children of God*', with the saints in glory, we are united in a love that knows no end. A vision of the Church (Christ's body) as a 'divine' society—a wonderful and sacred mystery; a home for sinners and a school for saints. Amen.