

All Saints' 2016

"How blessed are those who know their need of God", these are words from today's reading according to the New English Translation of the Bible. They sum up sainthood perfectly. A saint could have lived hundreds of years ago or they could still be living today. It is not the era they inhabited earth that distinguishes them, but their example of faithful living. And it always starts with a simple recognition - their need for God. This is why Jesus begins his sermon on the mount with this statement:

"How blessed are those who know their need of God"

One of the fine things about being a committed Christian believer is that we have set before us a whole plethora of role models who have been recognised by the Church for their special contribution to the faith's flourishing in past ages. The lives of the saints are a testimony to the endeavours of individuals and whole communities who have put God first. This devotion to God then leads them to put others first and do miraculous things, even at great personal cost. The history books are dominated by such examples of Christian character, whether it be St Paul in the first century or Oscar Romero in twentieth.

There is one era of British history that produced more saints than any other. The list of Anglo-Saxon saints and their endeavours is a most inspiring thing for anyone of even the most tentative curiosity about faith. These stories include people like St Aiden, St Cuthbert, St Wilfred, St Hilda, St Beda, St Etheldreda... This group of Anglo-Saxon saints were largely responsible for the growth of Christianity throughout England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, at a time when there was constant warring between different kingdoms and the invasions of the Danes and Norse made having a faith a very risky business indeed. Nonetheless, it is difficult to imagine how Christianity would have established itself in this country were it not for their deep commitment and resilience in the faith at such a very difficult time in history.

But outside of this period the stories of the lives of the Saints are simply inspirational. People like St Francis of Assisi, who lived in the twelfth century, was of noble

upbringing and whose father was extremely rich. Nonetheless, Francis became so appalled at his father's meanness towards the church and their work with the poor and destitute, that, as a young man, he relinquished everything that his father had given him, even the clothes on his back, and because he wanted no association with it, he began wandering the countryside in a simple cloak praying, preaching the good news of Jesus and helping the poor wherever he could. Soon many others joined him. Today, the monastic order he founded, called the Franciscans, number hundreds of thousands. His father died rich, hoarding his wealth, but is not remembered apart from his greediness and miserliness.

Interestingly, in the Lady Chapel of this church, we have an effigy of our very own anonymous saint. The style of the effigy dates from the late thirteenth century, probably somewhere between 1250 and 1300 AD. He was clearly a priest and there is strong evidence to suggest that people visited this church as a place of pilgrimage and would come to touch the Saint's face and hand; and praying for healing, protection and benediction whilst dipping their figure in the holy water in the stoup at his head and crossing themselves. We have no records of who this saint was, but the effigy, with its tonsured head, elongated neck, holy water stoup and priests' artefacts clearly point to this person being a significant holy person in this village and beyond.

The bravery and fortitude of some saints is quite simply inspiring. One such person is Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was a German priest in the Lutheran Church in Germany during the second world war. He opposed Hitler and was eventually executed for his troubles. But Bonhoeffer is not unique and many faithful Christians were murdered standing up to tyranny of the 1940s. Indeed this legacy continues in some parts of our world today.

Saints from every era provide examples of remarkable self-giving Christian character. How inspiring their remarkable example of fortitude and resilience in faith can be. How easy it would have been for them, when the times got tough, to lay aside their beliefs or let go of their Christian moral integrity. But their faith is what

marks them out. In fact, if it were not for the witness of these remarkable individuals and communities in every era, the church simply would not continue to exist. And the church desperately needs such strong Christian examples today if it is to continue to flourish beyond the present age.

But what of today's 'saints' of Geddington and Weekly? What is to be said of all of you? How are you to be described - indeed, is it even possible to embark on so precarious a venture?

But seriously though, sooner or later, our Christian character will be brought into the spotlight, both for us as individuals and for us as Church communities. The future will no doubt judge us, but more importantly, God will judge us too. So it is worth us taking some time to seriously assess our own Christian character. Using the example of past saints can be an excellent way of doing just that. Looking at the example of the martyrs of the Second World War concentration camps, we may ask; when we see appalling oppression and persecution taking place, do we sit back simply regretting what we can see happening, or do we step forward and put ourselves in a place of danger in the hope that others' suffering might be eased as a result of our actions?

Then looking at the example of the Anglo-Saxon Saints, we can ask; when we are confronted with staunch opposition to our faith do we lay it to one side and allow the secular world view to win the argument or do we resolutely hold firm to our faith during the most difficult and challenging times?

And if we look at the example of St Francis of Assisi; do we feel closer to Francis or his father? Do we resent giving to God what we owe him, or do we give without counting the cost happy in the knowledge that his work is being done?

Whilst it has at its center important truths about the Christian way of life, today's message from St Luke's Gospel can sound hard hitting. The passage we heard is Luke's version of the sermon on the mount and it carries a particular twist with its

warnings against comfort and indulgence in the present life. But they are warnings worth heeding.

Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama have just co-authored a brilliant book called 'The Book of Joy'. Joy, they claim, is the key to life lived in its fullness. But they talk about how we can't have joy without first experiencing struggle or pain. They suggest that all of their combined experiences of life convince them that only through hard work, perseverance and struggle can one experience true, deep, spiritual joy. Such proper joy transforms the heart and builds character. The kind of joy that comes without having to first work for it, isn't joy at all, but some kind of shallow, bitter imposter that does not last. The trouble is, our society today encourages us to crave this short-lived, shallow alternative.

In today's reading from St Luke's Gospel, this is exactly what Jesus is talking about. If we have every comfort in this life and we sit on our treasure chests in our palatial homes affording ourselves every luxury, then we should not be surprised if our Christian character flees from us at the moment we most desperately need it. But if we train ourselves to live in a more restrained way, giving what we have without counting the cost, putting ourselves out for the sake of others, and making an effort to sacrifice a little bit of self-indulgence in order to carve out time for God, then such things will begin building our Christian character and transforming our hearts for the better.

Such Christian character is what saints are made of, and our society desperately needs such role models today. And it all begins with us and a personal recognition: "How blessed are those who know their need of God".

Amen.