



## **All Saints Marseille**

### **Sermon**

**3<sup>rd</sup> November 2019**

**Year C: All Saints Sunday**

**Daniel 7.1-3, 15-18; Ephesians 1.11-23; Luke 6.20-31**

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

We have arrived at the season of All Saints, which includes All Saints' Day (1st November) and All Souls' Day (2<sup>nd</sup> November). It's a season that is very special, and here in this church dedicated to all the Saints we are privileged to celebrate it as our Patronal Festival.

The reason All Saints' tide is special is that our faith is not a solitary one.<sup>1</sup> Through baptism we become members of one another in Christ, members of a company of saints whose mutual belonging transcends death. All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day both celebrate this mutual belonging. All Saints' Day celebrates men and women in whose lives the Church as a whole has seen the grace of God powerfully at work. It is an opportunity to give thanks for that grace, and for the wonderful ways in which it shapes a human life; it is a time to be encouraged by the example of the saints and to recall that sanctity may grow both in the ordinary circumstances, as well as the extraordinary crises, of human living.

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<sup>1</sup> Common Worship, *Times and Seasons*, Introduction to the Season, p. 537.



The Commemoration of the Faithful Departed on All Souls' Day celebrates the saints in a more local and intimate key. It allows us to remember with thanksgiving before God those whom we have known more directly: those who gave us life, or who nurtured us in faith. They are sometimes known as 'ordinary saints'.

What is a saint? Some of you probably know the story of the schoolchild who was asked that question, and who replied: 'A saint is someone the light shines through'. It turned out they were thinking of the saints they had seen pictured in stained glass windows. But it's a pretty good summary nonetheless. The light of God shining through a human being.

The English word 'saint' comes from the word 'sanctus', meaning hallowed, set apart for a sacred purpose. The early church tended to think of saints only as a group, and it was only later that 'saint' in the singular became used for individuals whose degree of devotion to Christ made the Church wish to remember them specifically.

Being added to the list, or 'canon', of saints by the church (which is why we talk of people being 'canonised') did not necessarily mean that all a saint's words and deeds were perfect. Saints were not faultless. But their lives were lived at a striking level of faithfulness and integrity, even if they made mistakes.

Saints recognised by the church are men and women who have given themselves to God in an unusual way, beyond what the rest of us manage. They are hugely varied, just as human beings are varied. And so individual saints appeal to different people. But what they have in common is that they have accepted and responded to God's grace wholeheartedly, each in their own way and to an exceptional degree.



I like the fact that this church is named after all the saints. It speaks of variety, of openness to possibility, of our individual ability to respond to stories of different saints in different ways. It also embraces the idea of the ‘ordinary saints’ I mentioned earlier, about which I will say more in a minute. It’s a good time of year to be celebrating a patronal festival, with the emphasis on remembrance that November always brings.

Back in September, when the church was open for the weekend of the Journées Européennes du Patrimoine, one of the questions we were often asked by visitors was whether Anglicans believe in saints. People seemed to understand there was a difference in this respect from the Roman Catholic faith. Well, being Anglican, as so often, the answer is ‘both-and’. Saints who were already in the canon at the time of the English Reformation largely continued to be recognised as saints afterwards. What we don’t now have in the Church of England is a formal process for recognising new saints. But individuals of exceptional holiness from all ages are acknowledged by the Church of England, even if they are not officially referred to as saints.

Some famous church buildings honour these people from recent times, particularly where they have died for their faith. If you have visited Canterbury Cathedral you will know that, at the east end of it, in a place of special honour, is a chapel dedicated to the Modern Martyrs. And on the west front of Westminster Abbey there are recent statues to 20<sup>th</sup> century martyrs such as Oscar Romero, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Maximilian Kolbe and Martin Luther King. I don’t think anyone would contest that they were saints. It’s just that a universally accepted mechanism for adding them to formal a list no longer exists<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Within the Anglican Communion this is devolved to local provinces (Resolution 79 of the Lambeth Conference 1958).



‘Someone the light shines through.’ There are also people we meet in our daily lives who are – and there really is no other word for it - saints. They make a difference, through their openness to God, their closeness to God. They have a beneficial effect on those around them – you always feel better for having been with them. They inspire other people with their qualities, which are often those named by Paul as the ‘fruits of the spirit’ – love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. They often also model the beatitudes which we heard in our Gospel reading from Luke this morning.

Luke’s beatitudes – those sentences of Jesus that begin with the words ‘Blessed are’ – are different from the ones in Matthew’s Gospel. And the differences are interesting. The sermon in Matthew is known as the Sermon on the Mount, because Jesus has gone up a mountainside to teach. In Luke Jesus has come down from a mountain where he has been praying, to a ‘level place’, coming among the people who are in need. Luke the physician, is preoccupied with the relief of suffering. Luke’s beatitudes are not about wanting to be godly. His are about a community of followers standing with the dispossessed, the marginalised, the grieving. Practising the presence of Christ where the world is in pain. For Luke, faith begins with compassion and care, not a system of belief. He knows the truth which people have so often discovered, that if they go and do something for someone in greater need than they are, they find that they receive more than they give.

That’s something which ‘ordinary saints’ are particularly good at. And today on our Patronal Festival is a very appropriate day to give thanks for them, for their impact on us, the ways they have changed our lives. As we look around the memorials in this church, the words written on them speak of how that works. I



have found myself wondering what they would have been like to meet. We don't know. But we are here, honouring the same God as they did. Holding the faith for our own generation, as we pray that those who come after us will do as well. For we are only ever stewards of the mystery of faith during our lifetime. Yet the church believes that our prayers are joined to those of the saints who have gone before us, in a continual song of prayer and praise to God. It is what in the Creed we call the Communion of Saints. In a world where everything seems focussed on the present and the immediate, we are privileged to hold a faith that connects us deeply to our inheritance from the past and to the promise of the future. For the Kingdom of God is both now and not yet. It breaks into the present from the future, like the promise of resurrection on the first Easter Day. And that is what we celebrate every time we meet in Christ's name.

So let us give thanks for all the saints, both those commemorated by the Church across time and space and those whose names are unknown to the world but whom we have encountered in our own lives. The priest-poet Malcolm Guite has written a poem about these 'Ordinary Saints', and I will end by reading it to you:

The ordinary saints, the ones we know,  
Our too-familiar family and friends,  
When shall we see them? Who can truly show  
Whilst still rough-hewn, the God who shapes our ends?  
Who will unveil the presence, glimpse the gold  
That is and always was our common ground,  
Stretch out a finger, feel, along the fold  
To find the flaw, to touch and search that wound  
From which the light we never noticed fell



Into our lives? Remember how we turned  
To look at them, and they looked back? That full-  
-eyed love unselved us, and we turned around,  
Unready for the wrench and reach of grace.  
But one day we will see them face to face.

Amen.