

All Saints Sunday

Daniel 7.1-3, 5-18; Ephesians 1.11-23; Luke 6.20-31

Later in this service I will say some words which are found in some early Christian liturgies: 'Holy things for the holy'. It is an invitation to communion. We make it rather plodding in contemporary English: 'God's holy gifts for God's holy people'. It can sound a bit precious, elitist even, 'Champagne for the posh' with the implication that any old brew will do for the rest.

All Saints' day invites us to think about holiness. And it can sound as though we are talking about a spiritual elite, the inner club who have made it while the rest of us struggle behind.

What are saints and what do they mean? 'Woe to you when all speak well of you', says Jesus. Saints are not there to be popular. They do not have to be attractive, well-rounded personalities, they do not have to get votes. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, when he was Bishop of St Albans said once of a flourishing church in an affluent corner of the diocese, 'It would take a saint to empty it...' One of the things saints do is to remind us of how little any of us really want to be Christians. The Beatitudes, in Luke's version, are particularly sharp. 'Blessed are you who are poor, blessed are you who are hungry, blessed are you who weep, blessed are you when people hate you'. Matthew's version is a bit less uncompromising, the poor become poor in spirit and the hungry are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness; but Luke's version presents us with the unpalatable contradiction that almost everything we dread is set before us as a way of being blessed, while everything we would rather like, like being fairly well-off, satisfied, happy and popular is condemned. And you wonder, I wonder, is this the moment to give up pretending to be a Christian and to take up yoga or astrology?

Can Christian holiness be desirable, attractive? Last week I was suggesting that we need to think about our wills, that this month of November is a good time to consider what we are leaving for those who come after us. The theme of inheritance comes back in today's epistle. The sentences tumble over one another as the writer tries to describe the rich inheritance that we have in Christ. We are Christ's beneficiaries, his desire for us is nothing less than what he has become himself, the resurrection life, the fullness of him who is all in all. Hope, glory, praise, power, inheritance. All this is about becoming a saint. We choose to name some particular individuals as saints, but in fact all are called to sainthood and sainthood is not an individual possession as much as something that happens to us as we absorb more and more of the life of Christ. The prophet Daniel speaks of the holy ones who will receive and possess the kingdom, and he is speaking in his veiled way, about the people of God, those whom God has called. Us.

One of the nice things about All Saints Sunday is that we get a glimpse of just how many there are in that great company of the saints, of how different they are, how particular they are, how kind, how broken, how eccentric, how difficult, delightful, creative and faithful are the saints of God. Holiness is like light refracted through thousands and thousands of different human faces, all bearing a facet of the one face, the one shining face of Jesus Christ. If there is one thing that unites this great company it is that they want God. They want more of God than they have now. They want to go on having more of God. What we call holiness begins in unsatisfied desire. That's where I come back to Luke's beatitudes. 'Blessed are you who are poor'. 'Blessed are you who are hungry'.

He talks to those who are unsatisfied, poor and hungry people who may well believe that God has cursed them. He is talking to people who cry in the night because they don't know how to face the dawn. He is talking to people who are shut out of society, who are hated because in spite of their neediness they are human and their plight causes discomfort. No one has ever called them blessed before, the best they could hope for is to be regarded as a problem, a nuisance which someone might be able to solve. No one has ever told them that they have dignity, that they are loved, that they are sons and daughters of the living God, and that within God's will, they will be rich, they will be fed, they will laugh. But Jesus is also talking to rich people, to those who have inherited or acquired wealth and who have squandered it away for themselves and their heirs, simply assuming that they are fortunate and so entitled to do what they like. Woe to you who are rich! For to be defined by such good luck is actually not a place of blessedness, but a bit of a nightmare. What does life hold for those 'who have received their consolation?' I think of a rich kid, a distant cousin actually who never needed to work, who needed nothing, wanted nothing, and ended up with a drug habit out of sheer boredom. Woe to you who are full now. Woe to you who laugh.

But then he is also talking to us, most of whom are neither desperately poor or spectacularly rich, and here he sets out his manifesto of holiness. 'Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you'. If it is God you want, become more human, train yourself in compassion, non-violence, prayer. Lay aside aggression and greed, don't cling on to things you don't need, or even to things you do. Turn things round in small ways and God will turn you round in big ways. The good works of the Gospel are not a substitute for faith, nor are they a way of paying for our salvation. They are training exercises in holiness. They help us to want to want God. They are rehearsals for heaven if you like, where the poor are made rich, the hungry fed, where those who mourn rejoice. So it comes back to what we really want.

Every time we come to the Eucharist we come with our desires disordered and confused, and as we go through the liturgy, confessing our incompetence at life, praising God for his glory, listening to the promises and warnings of scripture, bringing our gifts and ourselves to his altar there comes a point when we are invited to simply accept that God accepts us. That we are surrounded by the great company of the saints and angels and we are holy as they are holy. 'God's holy gifts for God's holy people'. Far too many words for what is being said. The Greek original is just two: HAGIA HAGIOIS. Holy for the holy. That is simply how it is in the communion of saints. And like another phrase in the liturgy that comes out too long in English the response to that is sursum corda, Lift up your hearts. Or as the Latin actually puts it, almost like the military command 'Present arms!' 'Up hearts!'