



All Saints

Those of us who think of ourselves as Christians – however apologetically, uncertainly or confidently we might use that word – for each of us, the job of trying to hold on to our faith can be – well, it can be quite trying. Today's Gospel is a bit of a case in point. First of all, Jesus tells his disciples that the people who will be blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those who are hated and reviled for their faith. And he then goes on to list four 'woes' – 'woe to you who are rich, who are full, who are laughing and woe to you if people speak well of you'. Really? To misquote the tennis player, John McEnroe – can he be serious? To be frank, if Jesus had been born in to 21st century Britain, his disciples might have told him he needed a better PR team.

So what are we to make of it all? The writer and priest, Mark Oakley, points out that Jesus's preaching is nearly always figurative - he tells stories. When Jesus blesses the poor, the hungry, the sorrowful, the outcasts he isn't suggesting that this is something we should aspire to. But realistically these are experiences we're all likely to have at some point in our lives. We all have moments when we feel hungry for love, or acceptance; we all have moments when we feel despair; we all have moments when we feel excluded or poor in spirit. And Jesus tells us that it's at just these moments – when we feel at our most broken and vulnerable – that God is right there, in the midst of it all. When he blesses those groups of people Jesus isn't offering himself as a magician – he doesn't promise instant relief or reward. But he does make it clear that we are all loved by God just as we are – loved in our brokenness and in our hunger, whether that's physical hunger or a

different kind of hunger – a longing to know God better, or to feel that our faith is stronger. It's precisely when our lives are falling apart around us that we can turn to God who, like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, always – *always* – comes running to meet us, arms outstretched to embrace and enfold us, wherever we are – even if, like the prodigal son, that happens to be covered in filth having lived among the swine.

And when he lists those woes, Jesus isn't suggesting that wealth, food and happiness are, in and of themselves, bad things. After all, he enjoyed sharing food and socialising with his friends – he shows us, by example, that these can be an enriching, joyous aspect of our lives. But he's making the point that if we depend on these things or take them for granted – if we expect, always, to feel well fed, physically and emotionally; if we think it's our right to be happy, all of the time, we will, inevitably, be disappointed and we can end up feeling permanently dissatisfied or resentful – we experience woe. That doesn't mean that God loves us any less in those moments – that simply never happens – but *we* may well end up feeling isolated and distanced from God.

So what about those added comments towards the end of today's reading? Jesus instructs his audience to love their enemies; to pray for their abusers; to turn the other cheek; to give away their clothes. It can sound like a list of almost impossible demands. But Jesus isn't asking us to passively accept abuse. I'm slightly hesitant to start talking about the Third Way at this point, as I know that for some of us it's associated with a sense of political

disappointment ... But putting that to one side, the contemporary scholar and teacher, Walter Wink, writes about the **Third Way** in relation to Jesus, and his teaching. It's a third way that goes beyond both passivity and violence. It's an alternative to both fight and flight. This Third Way that Jesus advocates certainly isn't about attacking your opponent, but nor does it mean acquiescing to injustice. There's a story told about Desmond Tutu that illustrates this beautifully ... the story goes that Bishop Tutu was walking past a building site on a narrow walkway that was the width of only one person. A white man appeared at the other end of the walkway, and when he saw Tutu said, 'I don't give way to gorillas'. At which point Bishop Tutu stepped aside, made a deep sweeping gesture, and responded, 'Ah, but I do'.

Desmond Tutu lived out Jesus's message to the letter – he loved his enemy, but he also refused to be cowed – he asserted his own moral dignity. And he also lived out the last sentence from today's gospel 'Do to others as you would have them do to you'. That final instruction can sound almost like a dare – Jesus daring us to be different - to live in a radically different way – but it can also feel as though Jesus is asking us to be saints – whatever that might mean.

As we celebrate All Saints Day today, the people who spring to mind may be the great saints – people who have led lives of great holiness, or people who do remarkable things on account of their faith. There's a long list – literally an A to Z – from Anthony, the patron saint of lost things, to Zita – the patron saint of maids and domestic servants but apparently also often appealed to help find lost keys – who knew?

And today *is* an opportunity to honour all of those great saints but it's also, just as importantly, a chance to remember and give thanks for all of the ordinary, everyday saints that we know, or have met - the ordinary saints who show their holiness in seemingly small, and inconsequential ways.

Being a saint, even of the everyday variety, means more than simply being kind and thoughtful – it means caring for the least and the lost, it means showing what Greg Boyle, the American Jesuit priest, describes as '*the power of boundless compassion*'. The everyday saints live out that final instruction from today's gospel – to 'do to others as you would have them do to you' - but sometimes they do that quite unwittingly.

Over the course of my life I've met a number of everyday saints. One of those was a nurse, called Kate, who I got to know when I was an 18-year old student nurse, working on my first ward placement. Kate was just a few years older than me – she was probably 22 or 23 – and I'm pretty sure she didn't think of herself as a saint. I know she enjoyed a laugh, and she had a fondness for something called Club 18-30 – a holiday company that some of you may know, loved by its customers for its cheerful enthusiasm, and its upbeat, party spirit. One morning, I came on duty to learn that an elderly woman had died in the night - and it was Kate, this young woman with a sense of fun, adventure and the ridiculous who first showed me how to lay out a dead body. She taught me to treat the person who had died with love and care and, to my great surprise, she spoke to the woman as we laid her out, telling her what we were doing. I can clearly remember Kate explaining to me what a privilege it is to lay a person out – it is, very literally, the last practical task that we can do for someone. I've laid out a number of people since then – the most poignant was when I laid out my mother, after she had died - and each time, I have thought of Kate and wished I could thank her for the priceless gift she gave me. Kate didn't perform a miracle and she really didn't lead an extraordinary or holy life. But on that cold November morning in 1977 she was the absolute embodiment of an ordinary, everyday saint.

In that brief encounter, I experienced a radical shift in perspective. Kate showed me that everybody – literally **every body** – matters. They matter whoever they are, whatever their age, whatever their background, and they matter even after they have died. And this is what the everyday saints do. They give us a glimpse of the divine – of the world as God waits and longs for it to be. A world where all are equal, where everyone is valued, where everyone knows themselves to be loved, known, named, honoured and respected. The everyday saints, whether consciously or not, answer that challenge of Jesus – to ‘Do to others as you would have them do to you’ and they treat us in the way we all hope – we **long** – to be treated. Their actions – however brief - are based on a recognition that each of us is sacred, each of us is holy, and each of us is made in the image of God. And this is why the saints in our lives are so important – because each encounter is an encounter with God. Each saint, in their muddled, imperfect, human way, gives us a glimpse of God’s glory, and God’s immeasurable boundless love that’s always with us even when – *especially when* – we feel at our most broken.

What we celebrate today on All Saints’ Day isn’t just the exemplary faith and

achievements of a select few, but God’s ability to use flawed people – and that includes every single one of us - to do divine things – to make beautiful things out of dust. Most of us probably don’t think of ourselves as saints but astonishingly – amazingly – all of us are, at some point in our lives. Each of us is a Kate.

As many of you know, it’s our practice at St James’s to gather together around the table here at the front not just for communion but for the Eucharistic prayer as well. It’s a way of showing, very explicitly, that all are welcome and that no-one – absolutely no-one – is excluded from God’s love, because God’s love isn’t limited by our standards. It’s not the depth of our faith, but our hunger and our need that qualify us to be fed. We come together as the broken saints – the saints who get it wrong, over and over again – knowing that God loves and cherishes us, just as we are. Today’s gospel reminds us, yet again, of God’s extravagant, limitless love, mercy and compassion. And it encourages us to ‘do to others as you would have them do to you’. Not so that you can become a saint, but because you already are. Amen

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