



1st November 2020  
All Saints  
Sermon – St James's Piccadilly  
The Revd Lucy Winkett

*May I speak in the name of God – Creator,  
Christ and Holy Spirit.*

What to say?

Our public conversation today is littered with words like 'bleak', 'foreboding', 'catastrophe', 'mental health crisis'. The prospect of four weeks of severe restrictions, commonly known as a lockdown, has settled like a blanket over life today; a background count of worry, a realisation that we must keep away from each other – our joy and energy can get suffocated, dampened down. Our spirits can get dulled. And our feelings of being afraid; perhaps a periodic being gripped but more commonly a dull thump of remaining afraid – is debilitating. Our eyes – my eyes – if I'm not careful, remain not fixed on the far horizon or a blue autumn sky – but on the pavement, fearful, cold, wet, grey. And on lifeless computer screens, on graphs I barely understand but which I know are going in the wrong direction.

Yes this is a tough moment.

I won't make assumptions about how you are doing, but I know you, and I intuitively feel that many of you will be struggling. And it's so important to say, to repeat that it is OK not to be OK. This church is here, not going anywhere, just online from Thursday; so please read the Wednesday weekly update for our plans over the next month, and join us for prayer every day at 12.

So yes this is a tough week, a tough moment. And alongside the proper

recognition of this hard day, something absolutely astonishing is also true, simultaneously and irreducibly: deeply baked in to the life of church and society even in 2020; which is that into this tough week, this tough winter bursts a riot of colour, noise, chatter, robes, bravery beyond belief, courage beyond measure – the communion of saints – the stories of human lives lived to the full; the awkward squad, the outspoken lot, the colossally unwise-if-you-want-to-stay-alive crowd. They burst onto the scene today with their stories of battles fought and won, justice called for, conversion of heart and mind that sometimes baffled even them at the time and propelled them into an unknown future.

Banish from your minds any thought of carefully crafted stained glass with saints captured and ossified, pious and still; and a message for our lockdown times; even the contemplatives, even the trappists, even the isolated scholars knew what it was to be fully alive, somehow to want to go to the heart of things; not waste their time in displacement activity but keep returning to the deepest meaning of living and the hardest truth of dying.

Here they come – the communion of saints – clattering through their pandemic prayers with us at this Eucharist - with stories from their own times of plagues and wars, persecutions and healings – and inviting us to live, to live, to live as friends and followers of Christ who knew such suffering and glory as they.

It's sometimes said that a saint isn't someone really pious - whose life makes you think 'gosh that looks a bit heavy - that looks like hard work. Saints are human beings who live their lives in such a way that you think 'I'll have what she's having'. Saints are somehow *especially alive*. Many of them have suffered terribly; and many die for what they believe in. The Christian tradition will always insist that life in abundance is our calling: the saints are simply the ones who've said yes.

Saints are companions who reassure us that the path we tread, however challenging or alarming, is one that's well-trodden. In this vast and unknowable universe, we are never alone.

Sometimes courageous or foolhardy, awkward as well as inspiring, saints are human beings who somehow have an irreducible desire to travel towards the centre of things, close to the dwelling place of God. Like a journey to the centre of the earth, saints will come close to the heat and the dust of living at the core.

I don't know about you - but I need their energy today, I need their example; their persistence, their awkwardness. I need their gold leaf and singing and playful defiance in the face of grim urban grey, and sickness and death.

Because somehow in this sacrament, I know their presence. It's not an intellectual knowing; it's not a thought-out theological argument for a category of humanity called saint that is a kind of upper class of Christian. It's not a pre Reformation piety or a post Reformation squeamishness about the saints.

It's a different kind of knowledge, a different kind of knowing. It's a felt knowledge that breaks my heart, and breaks it open and leaves me, in communion with the saints both undefended and undefeated.

Much of what we know about life and living, about death and dying is not stuff we understand intellectually: we live often by felt knowledge. And it's this kind of knowing that roots me in the fusion of eternity and time that I know is here at this sacrament and in the online community with those of us who are here physically: online and in the building, this is a liminal sacred space - for us physically, boundaried by prayer-soaked walls, and full of air thick with music and the smell of wine at the banquet of the kingdom rehearsed here every Sunday, every time. This will continue whatever the restrictions, whatever the constraints. We will be here making church, being church, not gathered but dispersed but no less present, no less bound by our baptism, whatever comes.

Come with me to this altar - not to make some kind of intellectual assent as to the existence of saints - of God even - but to do some deep felt theology, rooted in the body and blood that is mysteriously present here in the same way as it was for them.

To celebrate All Saints this year is to determinedly throw a party in a pandemic, but it's not a frivolous party; it has the depth of a wake. These are people who know what it is to live life on the edge, and they invite us to come to the edge and look over into the choices they made, not knowing if it would lead to oblivion or to the eternal life they staked their lives on.

And as we face four weeks of physical confinement, let our spirits remain unconfined. As our bodies are governed by the law that will keep us at home, let our spirits remain in tune with the Holy Spirit of God - ungovernable and free.

And to help us do this, we can call on the saints to remind us of two things;

1. Holiness
2. Eternity

Holiness is something beautiful that I can, with you, join in and deepen even in this time. Holiness is about our inner life and comes from an old English word meaning wholeness. To learn holiness is to learn we are whole, holistic beings. Even while we affirm that God alone is holy, we are asked to make decisions, to practise the kind of spiritual surrender, that bring us closer rather than further away from holiness. And it is precisely in the ordinariness of holiness and in the ordinary holiness of saints that their beauty and example are to be found.

The greatest mistake we can make in our spiritual lives is to surround ourselves with fantasies; if only I were a better person, or if only I hadn't had the family I had, if only I hadn't married that particular person, if only I had more money or a different job or more friends or fewer relatives or a different house.

It is part of the human condition from time to time to believe that everything would be better if we weren't us and this wasn't it and they weren't there ...

But men and women and children who live lives of holiness are somehow free from this level of "if only". The original people who were called saints were simply those who had remained faithful through death, often at the hands of others, and they went freely to their death, accepting that this was at that moment, simply *who they were and where they were*. It is in our generation that we are living through this pandemic. Holiness in the midst of this means starting from where we are and finding depth here – not wishing we were somewhere else.

And the really reassuring thing is that there is no such thing as a holy life set out in advance, some kind of one size fits all template, because the essence of what it is to be holy is to be here, now, because that's where God is, here, now. Holiness does not require a special set of circumstances or a particular preparation.

Because there is no work, no set of circumstances that cannot be hallowed, that cannot serve as a path to God or a setting for prayer. And to be honest, our own anxiety that we are somehow not doing enough or not living enough of a holy life has precisely the opposite effect: that is, that anxiety keeps us confined, gets us stuck, and frankly, change is much less likely.

And so it is in our gut that we are asked to let them affect us, not our heads. Because the freedom and holiness of the saints is rooted in their conviction that they are simply singing a different song: a music that finds its home in eternity.

And this is the second lesson from the saints; that the fear of death is dissolved by their freedom to accept it. Saints live thoroughly ordinary recognisable lives but are somehow marching to a different beat, dancing to a different rhythm that has its origin in the eternal dance of God. We're invited to listen for, and find that beat in our everyday, not in a life we wish we had or thought we would have by now.

The saints invite us to imagine a world of joyful, beautiful resistance to the forces of destruction and death: a place where our damaging fantasies are overwhelmed by our equally strong desire to love and the compulsion to forgive and the instinct to praise, to give deep thanks for all that has been, and for the future, to give in to our aching desire simply to say yes.

The next weeks will be hard, but the saints are with us. The ordinary people who loved the life they knew they would lose, but loved it anyway. In this kind of living, we are not alone; our inner life has hidden within it the seeds of holiness that remind us we are loved, we are broken hearted but open spirited, and that our hope is irrigated by both the suffering and the glory of the saints in light.

In this lockdown coming, in the months ahead, when isolation and lament, when fear

and pain will be our companions, let us also drink from the well of holiness offered to us by the presence of God with us.

We are together; this church community isn't going anywhere – daily prayers at midday, Sunday service, Sunday forum, and in the weekly update this Wednesday we will announce other rhythms of prayer and online gathering that will help to bind us, to be a community of hope, of assurance. You and I are called to live lives of holiness, wholeness, rooted in hope, and from the perspective of eternity.

To remember one of the saints we remember today: Julian of Norwich. She assured us that in the end, all shall be well.

Yes, in the end, all shall be well; but it is incredibly important to say too that if it is not well with you today, then that means it is not yet the end.

Amen.