

*The Communion of the saints*

In our service today we are doing something which is usually ignored by Protestant, Reformed denominations like our own: we are marking All Saints Day which falls on this date, November 1<sup>st</sup>, and which is followed tomorrow by All Souls Day. I wonder if these special days have any meaning for you at all, if you have ever celebrated them and, if so, what they have signified. The meaning and significance of these days down through the centuries is quite complicated, and has evolved and changed over the years, and I am not going to attempt to take you through all the twists and turns. But basically All Saints and All Souls Days commemorate those believers who have gone before us, our fellow Christians who have preceded us and kept the faith in their day and are now in Christ's nearer presence. So it is that a distinction is sometimes made between what is called the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant. The Church Militant is the church on earth, here and now, carrying out its mission, while the Church Triumphant is the church gathered up in heaven, the faithful dead, awaiting the last day and the new creation. And on All Saints and All Souls days our focus is on the latter, the Church Triumphant.

Over the centuries, however there has been a further distinction, between what we might call special Christians and normal Christians. Special Christians might be martyrs, people who suffered and died for the faith, or they might be what are commonly called 'saints' – notable Christians who lived the faith in a particularly exemplary way and who can continue to inspire Christians in other times. So we might think of St Paul, or St Theresa of Avila or St Theresa of Lisieux: all Christians whose walk with God made such an impression that they are remembered and celebrated - and in the Roman Catholic Church, of course, every day of the year is dedicated to one or more of these saints, and more are continually being added. Well, these people are the focus of All Saints Day – November 1<sup>st</sup>, today. But then, tomorrow, All Souls Day, we commemorate all other Christians who have gone before us – not martyrs and special Christians but all the countless believers whose names may be forgotten here on earth but who live on in heaven.

So we have come to distinguish between the Church Triumphant in Heaven and the Church Militant on earth; and between 'saints' who were Christians of special note and other, more common-or-garden believers. These commemorations evolve, however, and in recent times All Saints and All Souls Days have become an opportunity for people to remember the dead generally, and not specifically committed Christians, as churches have organised services for anyone wishing to come and light a candle or pause to remember a loved one who has passed away – that is a service that the Church can offer in a more secular time.

Now, it has to be said that many Protestants have been uneasy about all this – and for good reason. Back at the time of the Reformation all kinds of distorted beliefs and practices had crept in: praying to the dead and praying for the dead. And Protestants were often unhappy with the division between the rather super-spiritual saints who people prayed to and burnt candles to and ordinary, run-of-the-mill Christians. In the New Testament, after all, all Christians are called saints – there are no distinctions or grades.

Well, let me today, on this November 1<sup>st</sup> All Saints Day say a little of why I think it might be of benefit to mark All Saints' and All Souls' Days. And the first point is that these special days expand the horizons of our faith, and locate our Christian lives in a far bigger setting. Let me put it this way: as a Christian I am part of a movement, a body of people, that goes back centuries right to Jesus Christ. For over 2000 years people of every nation and tribe and tongue, and every age and every circumstance have confessed Christ and belonged to him – and of course that great fellowship of the faithful of which I am a part extends back long before Christ to the people of Israel, the one people of God stretching back to Abraham. So in the Book of Hebrews in the New Testament we read in chapter 11 an account of all the great heroes of the Old Testament: among them Abraham, Moses, Rahab – yes, Rahab the prostitute – and these are referred to by the writer as 'a great cloud of witnesses' that surround us and that are an encouragement to us to run the race of faith, stirred by their example. And in the Book of Revelation from which we read earlier there is that great vision

of the Church Triumphant in heaven, people of every tribe and tongue who gather before the throne and voice their praise to God. And we are told that these are the ones who have come out of the great ordeal – these are particularly the martyrs and those who have suffered for their faith – but they are just part of a bigger picture in the Book of Revelation of all the redeemed, all the people of God who are now at rest in God’s nearer presence.

Note, however, that we who dwell below, here and now, in the Church Militant are united with them. In the Book of Revelation the veil between heaven and earth is drawn aside and John sees into the invisible realm and he views the saints alive with Christ, just a whisper away from us. What we are glimpsing here is what is referred to as ‘The Communion of the Saints’: the fact that while Christians of every age are scattered through space and time we are united and gathered together in one great communion. And we need this broader horizon, this bigger picture. You see, I as an individual Christian, trying to live out my Christian life, am exceedingly vulnerable. I am prone to pressures and doubts and to ups and downs and on any particular day of the week my walk with God may be frail and faltering and I may feel disconnected from God and from the Church here below. But my life is caught up in something much bigger, this cloud of witnesses, Christians who have wrestled and struggled just like me and have sometimes wandered through dark valleys but who are now home, and at rest, and in the full light of God’s presence. And I’m happy just to know that where I walk by sometimes faltering faith they walk by sight, and I am in union with them and carried by them.

That’s why I love our hymn book. A good hymn book should of course have contemporary hymns and songs, but I love that we also have hymns from long ago, previous days. Sometimes, of course, that can be difficult because the words are sometimes sexist or not as we would express ourselves – but that is the whole point. The church must always speak in the idioms of its day and we can rejoice in the way those who have gone before us articulated their faith in their day - it’s a reminder of the Communion of the saints, of the great river of faith that we enter at our baptism.

But then, however, there are also these special Christians, ‘saints’ in the narrower sense, outstanding examples of faith lived out, and we need them too. In them we see how the faith has been made flesh in different times and places. So for example, in recent days I have referred in sermons to St Francis, because it was his feast day recently. We find that the life of St Francis 800 years ago addresses our contemporary ecological crisis. Such examples of faith lived, albeit by imperfect and sometimes odd people, nourish us in our day. And we might contrast such saints with two groups of people who we venerate in our modern, secular day. We might think first of the modern cult of the celebrity, people who are famous for 15 minutes and who are the focus for great media attention. And what makes us venerate celebrities is often their exceptional service of the gods of our day. So in militaristic times soldiers and generals become celebrities in their service of the god of war, while celebrities in our day stand out in their service of the gods of wealth and beauty and success. And of course celebrities invite us to look at them and their lives, to focus on them - whereas the saints of the Church are venerated because their lives point not to themselves but to the God they served, the God of Jesus Christ. The celebrity says, ‘look at me!’ The saint says ‘look at him!’, as their lives become a window into God and into the life of his Kingdom.

But then along with the cult of celebrity there is the cult of the hero – whether it’s the sporting hero or the military hero or fictional and comic-strip heroes. And there are three particular features of heroes: firstly they are equipped with exceptional powers of strength and ability; and secondly they are always winners – they may appear to be losing but there is always that last twist where they prevail; and thirdly heroes are often very much individuals: they are usually solo figures, often at odds with their peers and those who are on their side. Think of James Bond, so memorably played by Sean Connery whose death was announced yesterday. Well, saints are not like that: they are not equipped with any particular strength or power – Paul boasted of his physical weakness. And saints often appear to be losers: the vision in our reading from Revelation includes martyrs, those who suffered death for the cause. And saints are not solo artists – they are part of this great company pictured in our reading, this large cloud whose witness encourages and sustains and

supports them. Their song is not a solo but it blends in harmony with the great chorus of praise that swells before the throne and before the lamb.

So let us give thanks today for the Communion of saints of which we are a part, for the faithful who have gone before us and who have give us inspiration and example. And nowhere is the veil between heaven and earth, between us and them, thinner than here at this table of Holy Communion. Here Christ comes to us and as he does so, as with John's vision in Revelation, the veil between heaven and earth is drawn aside and we are all one in the Communion of the saints. Amen.

Almighty and ever-loving God,  
 eternal Creator of all that is,  
 Maker of the heavens and the earth,  
 we praise and worship you, our God and our Saviour.  
 You have made this world,  
 and you have created nations and families,  
 different tribes and tongues,  
 and you have drawn people together as neighbours,  
 uniting us in the bonds of love and  
 responsibility for one another.  
 And in the midst of this world you have placed  
 one special family, one, holy nation,  
 called to serve and to bear witness to your rule.  
 We praise and thank you for this people of God,  
 children of Abraham and brothers and sisters  
 in Jesus Christ.  
 We pray for forgiveness that we have not lived together  
 in unity and peace.  
 We pray for forgiveness that the conflicts and hostilities of the world have been  
 reflected in us:  
 that not only have we not lived our neighbour as ourself,  
 but we have not loved our fellow believer.  
 O God we confess to you the brokenness of our world,  
 and in particular the fracturing of our fellowship as the people of God.  
 Lord, have mercy upon us.  
 Forgive us and draw your world into unity,  
 even as you draw into one your people  
 in heaven and on earth.  
 We pray in Jesus' name and we join together in the prayer he taught us, saying....