

## FOR ALL THE SAINTS

*Sermon for the Feasts of All Saints and All Souls, Christ's Church Cathedral, Hamilton, Ontario, 6 November 2022 by Bishop Terry Brown. Lessons: Ephesians 1: 11-23 and Luke 19: 1-10.*

In the name of the triune God whom Saints and Angels adore, Amen.

This morning we mark both All Saints and All Souls Days, usually celebrated separately. However, the celebrations are also very closely related. Let me say a few words about each.

On All Saints, we celebrate the great company of saints throughout the ages, many known to God alone: faithful people in all ages and contexts, sometimes in impossible situations, but often not known by name to the church at large. They form the great Communion of Saints, gathered around the throne of God, a company into which we are invited, as we try to be "saints" in the world. We sometimes think of "saints" as extraordinary special. Yet throughout his letters, Paul refers to their recipients as "saints"; for example, in Ephesians 4:12, he writes that the different orders of ministry are given, "for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ." Almost always this use of "saints" is plural, to emphasize that it is the community and its relationships that is the fertile ground of sainthood, not individuals separated from others. Therefore, it would be quite appropriate for me to address you *all* as the saints of this cathedral.

This broad view of sainthood contrasts with the bureaucratic processes of canonization that developed in the Roman Catholic Church, especially in the Middle Ages, that continues with some simplification but still great enthusiasm today. In the earliest Christian years, saints were simply acclaimed and remembered upon their deaths, figures like the Blessed Virgin Mary, the first apostles, or bishops who codified the creeds, or particularly holy figures such as the Desert Fathers or, much later, St. Francis. However, the crowds were not always right, and various religious orders sought sainthood for their founders, or nations for their inspiring kings and queens. So, processes for making potential saints into "official saints," or canonization emerged, requiring a close examination of the potential saint's strengths and weaknesses. Because saints pray for us, miracles are also required, proof that a potential saint had interceded and brought miraculous healing to sick persons, for example. Sometimes this process took a long time, as in the case of Cardinal Newman, whose insight that doctrine is not static but develops over time, made him very suspicious. It took a century. About ten years ago, I visited the shrine of Blessed Solanus Casey in Detroit, with a friend. Blessed Solanus was a simple Franciscan priest, revered for his holiness, and the shrine is a kind of museum with the tour ending at his casket. At the time, Solanus's case for sainthood was stalled, and the shrine almost empty, and his promoters discouraged. They had been waiting for a long time and Solanus did not advance along the sainthood track. However, with the election of Pope Francis, and his interest in Franciscan saints, interest revived, and he has now been canonized. And sometimes canonizations raise later questions about the character of the sainted one, for example, St. Junipero Serra, founder of the California missions, whose canonization was opposed by many Indigenous groups and whose statues are often still defaced by protesters.

All Souls Day, on the other hand, is for everyone, all the faithful departed, and in some contexts, faithful people of all religious views. In the Middle Ages, it too became subject to ecclesiastical bureaucracy, with souls lodged in purgatory, needing the prayers of the faithful on earth to move them along towards paradise. It was common for wills to include a provision for requiem masses to lessen the deceased's time in purgatory. While the saints pray for us, we pray for "all souls."

The English Reformation, with its distrust of the cult of the saints, with their shrines and relics, rejection of purgatory and prayers for the dead, brought about major changes. The Book of Common Prayer retained the major saints' days, including All Saints Day, but All Soul's Day vanished, although pious prayers for the departed, an ancient tradition, continued. But slowly, All Souls Day has returned, and it is now in our *Book of Alternative Services*. We remember with thanksgiving *all* the faithful departed who have gone before us, whatever their virtues and flaws, and are united with them too in the Communion of Saints. Today, in the spirit of All Souls Day, we shall read some of their names, thanking God for their lives and witness. They rest in the hands of a loving God, awaiting Resurrection, and in time we shall join them.

As today's lessons speak primarily to All Saints Day, I shall reflect just a bit on sainthood. There is a well-known All Saints Day hymn, "I sing a song of the saints of God," which I am sure many of us sang as children. The first stanza goes:

I sing a song of the saints of God,  
patient and brave and true,  
who toiled and fought and lived and died  
for the Lord they loved and knew.  
And one was a doctor, and one was a queen,  
and one was a shepherdess on the green:  
they were all of them saints of God, and I mean,  
God helping, to be one too.

The final verse ends,

You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea,  
in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea;  
for the saints of God are just folk like me,  
and I mean to be one too.

A friend of mine recently, humorously but with some seriousness, called this the "semi-Pelagian" view of sainthood, the view that just as we earn grace by our good deeds, we gain sainthood by those deeds. It is perhaps a kind of "banking" model of sainthood, that we accumulate good deeds, God banks them in heaven, and we are rewarded, with interest, upon arrival there.

Clearly that view is not right, as today's Epistle from Ephesians makes clear. The action is God's in Christ, and we are drawn into that saving and loving action of God's Son in the world, we are sealed with the Holy Spirit, and, incorporated into Christ, "with the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints," grace is poured out and we lead lives of love, kindness, justice,

and compassion. St. Augustine is closer to the mark: “Love God and do whatever you please: for the soul trained in love to God will do nothing to offend the One who is Beloved.”

Thomas Merton, when asked about sanctity and sainthood replied, “For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore, the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self.” As Christians, we believe that our true selves are found in relationship with the divine. Strikingly, though Merton lived as a contemplative monk, he was always being driven into relationships with other people, with the world, into situations of injustice, including the Vietnam war, and the experience of other faiths. We come back to the observation that “saints” is almost always plural in St. Paul’s letters: it is the church as a community of believers that is called to sainthood. We need God and each other to grow into our common sainthood.

Today’s Gospel, the Beatitudes as recounted by St. Luke, provide some expectations for saintly behaviour: blessedness in poverty, hunger, grief, being hated, exclusion and defamation, for in the end those situations will be reversed. After warnings against wealth, satiety, self-regarding happiness and complacency, Jesus summarizes: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” What is put forth is radical generosity and radical forgiveness: turn the other cheek, give whatever is asked. And finally, the Golden Rule: “do to others as you would have them do to you.”

Many of you may have seen a popular poster that features the equivalent of the Golden Rule in thirteen different religions of the world. Jesus’s teaching here did not come out of the blue. As the poster points out, a commentary in the Talmud reads, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. This is the whole Torah [or Law]; all the rest is commentary.” The resemblances in the sayings from Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and the other faiths are striking. Any legitimate religion seeks the happiness of the other, not their oppression. Indeed, the Golden Rule gives us a way to approach other religious faiths in a friendly way.

Of course, saints are also sinners. Nelson Mandela commented of himself, “I am not a saint unless you think of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying.” We are right to doubt anyone who claims perfection and we are right to be suspicious of spiritualities that try to regulate every small part of our lives in detail. There is a certain wild freedom in being open to the life of a saint: we belong to God, not the world. Saints should also be troublemakers: G.K. Chesterton reminds us, “Jesus promised his disciples three things—that they would be completely fearless, absurdly happy, and in constant trouble.” All those characteristics imply fierce interaction with the world, not withdrawal and passive quietism. Indeed, the great Communion of Saints whom we celebrate today encourages us all in *our* saintly ministries, including our disruptions of the status quo. Without doubt, in our world today, including Ontario, we need such disruptions.

Saints are in it for the long haul, not just the heroic moment. I often come back to a poem by the late American poet, Jack Gilbert, entitled “The Abnormal is not Courage”. He makes the point that it is the long faithful life, not the moment of passionate heroism, that is what is true courage. The last ten lines of the poem read:

Not the marvelous act, but the evident conclusion of being.  
Not strangeness, but a leap forward of the same quality.  
Accomplishment. The even loyalty. But fresh.  
Not the Prodigal Son, nor Faustus. But Penelope.  
The thing steady and clear. Then the crescendo.  
The real form. The culmination. And the exceeding.  
Not the surprise. The amazed understanding. The marriage,  
Not the month's rapture. Not the exception. The beauty  
That is of many days. Steady and clear.  
It is the normal excellence, of long accomplishment.

Those are words of encouragement to us who may feel we may not have been heroic enough. Saints are not just those who have suffered dramatic and heroic martyrdoms, but ordinary folk who have been faithful, and whose routine but deeply enriching sainthood grows from day to day. God grant us grace that we too may faithfully answer and fulfill our vocation to sainthood, with steady and courageous endurance and flourishing, and even troublemaking, in communion with those whom we remember today, despite any discouragement. Thanks be to God.