



All Saints and All Souls Sunday  
30 October 2016

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## Exciting Holiness

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

**Reading: Wisdom 3.1-9; Revelation 21.1-6a; Luke 6.20-31**

When the liturgical commission in 1997 redrafted the Calendar of Christian Saints to be remembered in the Anglican Church they commissioned a book to assist with collects or prayers and short biographies and readings to make these saints known to us. It is a broad, generous and inclusive list which includes Christians from different denominations and theological perspectives. They called this book *Exciting Holiness*.

Those we call saints, as you might imagine, are not without their shadows or their detractors, eager to point out their sins weaknesses and fallibility. Thank God for that, I always feel, they make the saints more approachable. It is difficult to identify with a saint so lily white pure and virtuous that they make you feel "O God there is no hope for someone like me." Many people, I think, identify with Saint Peter not because he's the first infallible Pope but precisely because he is so fallible. He gets it wrong so many times: "Get away from a sinful man," he calls out. He turns away from Christ as he walks across the water, he sinks, he betrays Jesus and hears the cock crow and even after Jesus' resurrection he gets stuff wrong and is reprimanded by Paul for his double standards in dealing with Jews and Gentiles. And yet he doesn't give up- he hangs on in there. He is there when the cock crows crying, but he's also there to tell the risen Christ three times over that despite all appearances to the contrary he does really love him. And it is this fallible human love, love in the process of becoming, that Jesus still chooses to become the foundation of his church. The latest saint, Mother Teresa, didn't always get it all right either and you will have heard there are those who accuse her of her House for the Dying doing too little to prevent the cause of death or challenge the underlying causes of poverty. No saint is perfect. But we remember them because like the title of the book I mentioned suggests- the saints are those whose lives excite us to holiness- inspire us, help us to see the beyond, the presence of God in the midst of our lives. Thomas Merton famously said that all of us are called to become saints.

I wonder when you last met a saint? More often than you think I expect. I met a saint in South Africa a few weeks ago. She was over 80 years old. She has lived in the black township of Soweto for fifty years. She must have seen a few things. Witnessed the violent evil of apartheid. Known the horror and the divisions and the inequalities. But she invited me to stay with her in her house built after the apartheid governments forced removals that now she had very much made her own. When I arrived her niece told me she had spent all the morning washing the curtains. She'd never had a white man or priest to stay before. She showed me with pride the bed she had made up for me. She'd gone to a lot of trouble, fresh sheets, scrubbed floor-. She showed me the bathroom she'd just had built, still rough cement, but with a polished basin I would be the first to use it. I thanked her, felt her warmth, and inhabited her generous spirit and smile. I turned on the tap to wash and clean my teeth and suddenly realised the basin had not been plumbed in and all the water was pouring onto the floor and the little house was awash. No way of concealing that, the water was flooding out of my bedroom under the door into the house. I apologised to her profusely and she apologised to me even more profusely and in the middle of the night in Soweto me and an 80 year old black auntie mopped the house dry together. "Your neighbour is the neighbour who gives you life," Rowan Williams said in his lecture here. She certainly did that. Next morning she watched me eat the breakfast she had so thoughtfully made. Two frankfurter sausage from a tin and two boiled eggs. And I left, leaving the wet socks with which I had paddled through her house the night before under the bed. In the evening there was a phone call from Auntie's niece: "You left your wet socks behind" she said. "Auntie has washed and dried them." "Don't worry," I said "they are only old ones with holes, you can tell Auntie to throw them away." "Throw them away Auntie she will

frame them in memory of you!” She will keep my socks and I will carry Auntie and the little house in Soweto in my heart. “Do to others as you would have them do unto you.”

The first thing I think to realise about saintliness is its not some sort of holy façade. It’s not something we do, or some behaviour that we put on to prove that we are more righteous than others. It’s not about being “holier than thou,” or “a goodie two shoes.” Neither is it about being some spiritual athlete who is so courageous or sacrificial or self-denying that they put everyone else to shame. Rather a saint is a person who excites us to holiness by showing us Christ. And how do they do that. By taking off the mask, breaking open the kernel of the shell –so that the life of God flows out- a human being stripped back so that the life of God can be revealed in their own flesh and blood as we do stuff like mop the floor.

Sainthood goes against the whole accumulative thrust of our culture. A culture which teaches that to be is to have and to have is to achieve and to achieve is to be better than others. And to live your dream means being the last man standing. The saint has a different calling. Again and again we see lives not calculated to succeed in human terms but lives which answer a deeper calling. What marks those lives? Well of course they are all different and each unique yet we see there is an offering in these lives, a generosity, a costly gift, yes a sacrifice, that somehow, in some way reveals the presence of God. God most fully revealed in ordinary-sacred encounters like an old woman in Soweto treating me as the most honoured guest, dissolving a history of suffering and racial prejudice and making her home my home.

The saint is born when the seed falls upon the ground and dies. In the darkness of that death the overwhelming temptation is to say: “I’m nothing. I’m never going to grow, they’ve ruined my chances. There’s no hope for me. Everyone else is going to flourish while I remain dormant in this soil.” But it is here, when we abandon ourselves to God, that the mustard seed begins its growth. A growth that comes entirely from God.

You see holiness is not something you can download like a computer programme. It is what opens up when we begin to realise our roots and our meaning and our being are in God. In a deeply thought provoking lecture by Sarah Coakley last week at St Martin’s she suggested that discovering eternal life was about learning to love one’s neighbour as ‘oneself’. “How do we learn to love ourselves?” she asked, “for without that we certainly cannot rightly love our neighbour. It is on this matter too that Saint Bernard of Clairvaux is so interesting and illuminating; for he insists that the greatest height of love is not simply to love God for God’s sake (itself a very high state) but rather to love oneself for God’s sake, that is to find one’s true identity in that same grace or ecstasy that flows out of the cramped self of self-loathing and into that ‘neighbourly’ recognition that only God can impart.” In order to do this Sarah Coakley suggested: “we need to rediscover through a discipline of prayer, meditation and contemplation that God in whom we live and move and have our being. It is by opening ourselves to the abundant Spirit of God that we are freed from all that deforms or binds the image and life of God at work in us.” She suggested that far from being the slaves of the selfish gene- we all have the choice of becoming the witnesses and bearers of God’s abundant life in us.

Look at today’s Gospel is this not what it is saying: in your poverty the kingdom of God is born- in your hunger God’s abundance will be realised, in your compassion and in your weeping for the world a new joy and laughter will arise. When you are persecuted and reviled and excluded and defamed on account of your faith it is then that the celebration and the transformation of God begins. A new way of living is born. A new order. A saintliness of love for God, love for neighbour and love for oneself. What does that look like? It looks like grace, a truthfulness that lets God’s Spirit in and out. A nakedness that clothes with light. God as the ground of our very being. So often we skim along the surface of life. “God is within us and yet we are far from ourselves” as Augustine says. We have been obsessed by the façade, and lost God the treasure at the heart of our faith. Sainthood is like the window through which the light of God streams. The church is not an end in itself- we are not here to safeguard the institution. We can so easily become consumers rather than flames of God’s fire. We are here to seek Christ who comes in through the open door of this church and out in us, out into the world. Communion with God, communion with ourselves, communion with our neighbour are realisations of the same centre- and that centre is in God. When we go out of this place whether it is to drink coffee in the hall or to have lunch with friends

or to back to our families or to meet refugees in the Connection the same communion continues.  
The Gospel does not end.

The saints are there, if only we have eyes to see them, and hearts to meditate upon God's presence in the world. Those who love God- present here or just beyond the veil willing us to seek our true nature in God. Those who are exciting us to holiness.