

Sermon for Holy Communion at St Mary's Stoke D'Abernon on All Saints Day, 29th October 2016

Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 6:20-31

Yesterday morning there was a lot of gardening going on around our church, in two places: on this side of the churchyard wall, and around St Mary's Hall.

Around the Hall a group of people who had been sentenced by the magistrates to so-many hours of community service, for various misdemeanours, were working hard to tidy up the area in front of the Hall, which had been a bit of a wilderness. It now looks all nice and clear, ready for grass to be seeded.

In the churchyard, as you will have realised as you walked in, or if you were one of the stalwarts, our stalwarts who cut the grass and neatened everything up have done a wonderful job, for which we are all really grateful.

Godfrey¹ told me yesterday that he had bumped into one of the community service people who, looking over the wall, and assuming that everyone working round St Mary's on a Saturday morning had come there for the same reason, and pointing to the church working party, asked, 'What did those guys do?'

Well, I don't remember, Godfrey, exactly what you said in response, but I would suggest that a possible riposte might have been if you'd said, 'They're not naughty boys, you know. Those people are saints!'

Well, you saints know who you are, and you deserve a saintly glow for all your hard work. You might balk slightly at being called 'saints', but I assure you, there is a perfectly good Biblical sense in which you fit that description.

Look at the letter to the Ephesians, which was our first lesson. It's probably by a scholar writing soon after St Paul's death, rather than by St. Paul himself, but it is very much in his style. He praises the people in Ephesus for their faith, and 'love towards all the saints'. Then comes his prayer, 'that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints...'

It seems a little bit odd that the author, 'Paul', is so complimentary about the people in Ephesus, after the story in the Acts of the Apostles chapter 19 of St

¹ Revd Godfrey Hilliard, Assistant Rector

Paul and his two followers having a tough time there, because there were a lot of people there who worshipped the Greek god Diana, or Artemis: 'Great is Diana of the Ephesians!' they cried. It was a riot. No matter: even if Paul didn't write this letter, the sentiments it expresses are completely in line with his theology.

The sense is that those who are Christians, those who have received the good news and believe, are set apart from the mass of humanity: they are consecrated, made close to God, sacred. There's an additional sense, that the 'saints' are the ones who have made it to heaven, who are saved and with the Lord. 'For all the saints, who from their labours rest', goes the hymn. Those saints were not just resting on their gardening tools. They had gone to their eternal rest. But then at the end of the passage in Ephesians, we are brought back to what saints do on earth: they are the church, 'which is his body, [Jesus' body], the fullness of him who fills all in all.'

'Saints' are described in some Bible translations as 'God's people' or 'those who trust in him'. [New English Bible, Eph.1:15,19.] The Greek word for 'saint', ἅγιος, goes back much earlier than Christianity. It means, 'sacred', 'consecrated', originally to the Greek gods: it means somebody intimate with the divine. It could have included those close to Diana of the Ephesians.

Of course we don't always think of saints as being the same as ordinary church members - although that's what I'm saying is the most important sense. People also think that 'saints' are especially good people, 'saintly': just like those of you who were giving up your Saturday to mow the churchyard, say.

There's another way to look at saints. Think of the Catholic prayer, 'Hail Mary, ... Holy Mary, Mother of God ... pray for us².' Think of what our church is called - Saint Mary's. In the Roman church, saints are especially worthy church leaders and believers, whose witness to the Gospel was so strong that they were almost like prophets - through them, Christians could glimpse the realm of God.

This goes with the idea that God is so awesome that He can only be approached, only worshipped, through a mediator, through a priest. In Roman Catholic worship, the theory is that the priest is saying the Mass for the congregation, on their behalf. He stands between the believers and God. It harks back to the Jewish idea of priesthood where the priest was the only one who could enter the Holy of Holies in the Temple, once a year on the Day of

² Hail Mary, full of Grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed are thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

Atonement, and come face to face with God, without being destroyed in the process, as ordinary humans would have been. You can look it up in the Old Testament, in Leviticus 16:2f.

Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformers were against the idea of venerating saints and almost worshipping their images. Article XXII of the 39 Articles in the Book of Common Prayer puts the Protestant position:

'THE Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory, Pardons, Worshipping, and Adoration, as well of Images as of Reliques, and also invocation of Saints, is a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God.'

That may be rather too fierce - but certainly the prohibition in the Ten Commandments against graven images, and the consistent theme in the Old Testament, contrasting the worship of pagan gods such as Baal, and sacred poles, and the downfall of Israel when they had made a golden calf and worshipped it instead of remaining faithful to the One True God - these are all factors in the Protestant rejection of the veneration of saints and of images of saints.

Also of course, that Protestant view was associated very much with the idea of the priesthood of all believers - following 1 Timothy 2:5, the only mediator between God and men is Christ Himself. No man or woman need stand between us and God.

I would suggest, however, that there is a sense in which we can still celebrate saints, without straying into idolatry. We can remember, we can commemorate, people whose faith was exemplary, perhaps because they were especially brave - enduring persecution for their faith, or because they provided such an inspiring example of Christian faith, so as to inspire others. Mother Theresa is an example.

The Roman church does still venerate relics and pray to God 'through' saints. They have a set procedure by which someone can become recognised as a saint, which involves their being the author of miracles. I suppose that this goes with the Roman Catholic idea that a saint has an almost prophetic role. God speaks through his saints. God is in them - so they can do miracles.

There are things to like in both the ways of looking at saints, the Protestant and the Roman Catholic. I wouldn't want to be so trenchantly negative as Article XXII of the 39 Articles, but equally I am a bit sceptical about the way the Roman church produces miracles.

But really I think that doesn't matter too much. More important is to move on from rather dry analysis of what a saint is, and what he does, to the real thrust of what I have to say this morning. That is, what must I, what must you, do in order really to become a saint?

That's where our Gospel lesson comes in. It's St Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount. We usually read it in St Matthew's Gospel, chapter 5; but here it is again in St Luke. Love your enemies. Don't worry about being poor. Worry a lot about being rich. Everything is upside-down, in the Kingdom of God. Go the extra mile. Turn the other cheek. Verse 31, 'Do to others as you would have them do to you' - the Golden Rule. You would indeed be a good person if you did all those things - you might even be a saint.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant