

St.Alban's Epping, 4th November 2018

**WHO ARE THE SAINTS? (All Saints' Day Celebration)
(Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 24; Revelation 21:1-6; John 11:32-44)**

Just under two months ago, as many of you will be aware, Sarah and I joined the perhaps 300,000 pilgrims who this year will **walk the Camino**, journeying along the path taken by pilgrims over the centuries to Santiago de Compostela, in north-west Spain. Of course, pilgrims have come from many different places in Europe and even beyond, and so there are many routes that they have taken. The best-known route begins on the French side of the Pyrenees: it is 800 km long and takes 1-2 months to walk. We used a much shorter route used by many pilgrims who would have come by boat from different parts of the British Isles or Northern Europe: what is called the **English Camino** is about 120 km long, and it took us six days to walk. It certainly had its challenges, but we found it a wonderful experience.

But why walk to this city which probably many of us have not even heard of? Santiago literally means **St.James**. And in the ninth century, the bones of St.James the Apostle were located in a field right where a great cathedral and a fine city were then built. In the middle ages, pilgrims would come to pray before the bones of St.James, seeking forgiveness or healing for themselves, or for others whom they represented.

Now I have to say that I am far from convinced that the bones in the coffin in the crypt of the cathedral actually belong to St.James the son of Zebedee, but many people have had that belief, and no doubt many pilgrims today still believe it. While we were in Santiago, I purchased a St.James' cross, in fact something of a combination of a cross and a sword, a personal memento of the pilgrimage. I should point out that there were a number of factors leading to our decision to walk the Camino, but getting close to St.James' bones was not one of them!

But in the middle ages, for a church or cathedral to have the remains of great saints was a big deal! I wonder whether there was something of a culture that jumped that boundary between faith and superstition! When most of us think of the Saints these days, we tend to think of great

Christians of the past – apostles, teachers, miracle workers, missionaries, servants of the poor – Christians over the ages who lived outstanding lives and achieved great things in Christ's name.

Many Saints have their special days of commemoration and celebration: so in this Parish we annually celebrate St.Alban in June, and St.Aidan, after whom our branch church is named, in August. However November 1st is **All Saints' Day**. It used to be often called All Hallows' Day, and hence the night before it is called Halloween: but that's another story! In this parish, our custom is to make the festival of All Saints something of a special occasion. Hence this first Sunday of November is our celebration of All Saints.

Is a Saint then one of those great outstanding Christians of old: depicted with a halo on stained glass and paintings, performing miracles, nothing to do with us in our ordinary fallible lives, perhaps with bones and relics kept safe in ancient cathedrals? Do you remember how excited people got when Mary McKillop was under consideration and investigation as a possible saint? Were those claimed miracles for real? For without those miracles she couldn't be recognized as a saint.

I have to admit that I thought that this was all missing the point. Who really are the saints? We get a clue by reading the opening words of Paul's letters: he saw the Christians of Rome and Corinth and Ephesus and the other churches as saints! And they weren't always outstanding Christians, sometimes far from it! A saint is literally a holy person, a person who belongs to God in a special way. If we are Christians, if we trust in Jesus Christ and seek to live as his followers, we are truly God's people, we are saints.

No, I don't see any haloes in the congregation. I don't expect you to start performing miracles. I assume your feet will still touch the ground when you leave the church. And I don't expect you to be perfect. That old phrase should not be "saints **and** sinners": the reality is that saints **are** sinners. We saints are people who fall short and need God's forgiveness, and find that forgiveness as we trust in Jesus. A saint, first and foremost, is simply a Christian. In a real sense, we who are Christians are **all Saints**.

Our readings for today relate in different ways to the message of All Saints' Day. **Psalm 24** points to the holiness of the Lord, focussing on his holy temple, which symbolized his presence with his people. Who is fit to come into the presence of the Lord? "Those who have clean hands and a pure heart, who have not set their soul upon idols and false gods, whose word is not a dishonest word but one that can be believed."

What the Psalmist is saying is that if we are truly God's people, our lives will reflect that reality. We are to live out our faith. Perfection is not here and now: but living a godly life is a challenge to be taken up and lived out by all of us.

Our Gospel reading from **John** records Jesus' raising of his friend Lazarus from death. This extraordinary miracle points beyond itself to a greater reality, summed up in words of Jesus recorded a little earlier in the same chapter. "I am the resurrection and the life", he said. "Whoever believes in me, though they die, will have eternal life." Lazarus' life on earth was extended for a limited time through this miracle of Jesus. But Jesus offers life without limit, God's kind of life, for eternity, to all who trust in him. And so our Gospel brings out the hope that we have through Jesus, the bringer of life.

Then our readings from **Isaiah** and the **Book of Revelation** depict more of that hope, and especially emphasize that it is a shared hope. Isaiah's rather tantalizing picture of a great feast of wonderful food and wine is not all about gluttony and drunkenness, but about joy and fulfilment and fellowship and God's blessing.

And Revelation points us to God's new creation, a new heaven and a new earth, with the barriers down between us and God. God will in the fullest sense be with his people, among his people. All that is wrong will be done away with. Eternity will not be boring, as some people suggest: it will be full of joy and satisfaction and love and fellowship, and I believe, meaningful and joyful service. But in particular, it will bring all God's people together. We saints are part of a great community of followers of Jesus, stretching over the centuries, and from all parts of the world. In the creed we call it the communion of saints, and we are part of it!

So what about all those saints of old? Do they have any relevance? Of course they do! As we learn about them, we must give thanks for their faithful service. We can be inspired and challenged by their example. We can learn from their achievements, and even from their mistakes and failings. They are special members of God's family. So it is certainly right to remember them, to give them due honour, to celebrate them, while never forgetting that it is Christ alone to whom we look for salvation and forgiveness – just as they did!

In Christ, we are all saints, we are all God's beloved people. In our 10am service, I will baptize little Eleanor Hickey. We will commit her to God for the forgiveness we know she will need like the rest of us, and for the light she will need to live as his child, as a saint. Her sponsors will make promises of faith and faithful service on her behalf, and undertake to guide her along the Christian path, and to keep her connected to the Christian family, the church. And the water of baptism will depict the cleansing of forgiveness, and the life that is God's eternal gift to his people. And the congregation will then welcome her into God's eternal family.

And if we have been baptized, so it is for us. Those promises have been made, and those blessings have been claimed.

Let's never forget that a saint is not *someone else*! All believers are Saints, with a wonderful eternal hope in Christ, with a challenge to truly seek to live as God's children. And we are members of God's family, called to assist and encourage and support and love each other as we all make our own pilgrimage through life, and into eternal life. Amen.

Paul Weaver