



Sermon: - 5th November 2017

Who are the Saints?

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11; Matthew 4: 12-20

Once upon a time there were two evil brothers. They were very rich although their money was the proceeds of crime. They used their money to hide their evil ways from the public. They even attended the same church, and everybody thought they were upstanding Christians.

Then, the minister retired and a new one came to the church. He could see right through the brothers' deception. He was also a very good preacher, not afraid to tell the truth, honest and passionate. More people came to the church so that they began to run out of room and so, a fundraising campaign was started to build a new church.

Then, one of the brothers died. His brother came to the new minister before the funeral and handed him a cheque for the whole amount needed to finish paying for the new building.

"This is yours" he said, "on one condition, at his funeral, you must say my brother was a saint."

The Minister gave his word and deposited the cheque in the bank.

The next day at the funeral, the pastor did not hold back. "He was an evil man," he said. "He cheated on his wife and abused his family. His wealth was based on the proceeds of crime, drug peddling and other illegal activities" After going on in this vein for some time, he drew his speech to a close, "however," he said, "compared to his brother, he was a saint!"

Today is the day the church celebrates All Saints Day. It's one of my favourite days because it's the day that we remember that when we sit in church on a Sunday morning, or when we go about our business throughout the week, we don't do this as isolated individuals. We don't praise and work and live as Christians who have no history or past, or indeed who have no hope or future. Rather we sit in a long tradition of great men and women of God who have worked and worshipped and rejoiced and wept in the service of

our Lord and his church. So today we celebrate all the saints who have gone before us and all who live now and all who will come after us.

And it seems to me that it's particularly appropriate to be celebrating this on the same day as we remember 500 years of Reformation. 500 years since Martin Luther suggested that to be a Saint was not something that could be purchased, and did not depend on good deeds, or great works but rather was the free gift of God given by his grace.

And if you are wondering what on earth all this has to do with the bible passages that we read this morning, these two passages illustrate the extent to which we depend upon God, rather than ourselves and our good works for salvation. The passage from Deuteronomy reminds us that it was God who brought the Israelites out of Egypt, through his power and might, and saved them when they could not save themselves. Even although they often turned their backs on him and did not do the things he asked of them he did not turn his back on them but continued to forgive and love and save. He brought them into a promised land, as we are told, flowing with milk and honey, and to help them remember that it was God who did this, he asked them to make offerings to him to thank him. Not that they would be saved by these offerings, but simply that by this reminder they would know that it was to God that they owed their liberation. He saved them, and he called them to be his people.

And then in the New Testament passage, in Matthew, we see Jesus calling the first disciples. They had no qualifications to be his followers. They were not teachers, or priests, or educated in any way. They were not especially good or especially clever, yet they were the ones Jesus chose to build his church. And in their footsteps followed so many others who have added to what they began, and helped to build the faith, and spread the gospel. And today we think of one of those in particular, Martin Luther, who was so influential in enabling us to understand what it means to be Christian. That, as we heard in the Romans passage I read to the children, we are saved by God's grace through his mercy, not by our works.

And so, as we celebrate this day, All Saints day, we remember those who have walked this road before us, who are the founders and fathers ... and mothers ... of our faith.

The great saints who accompany us on this journey, the apostles, Peter, Paul, Andrew. Later there were St Augustine, St Francis, St Columba. As well as those of more modern times, our Reformers, Luther and Calvin, and even more up to date, people like Dietrich

Bohoeffer, who spoke out against Hitler in Nazi Germany and died for his faith, Mother Theresa.

Those are the saints who have gone before us, those who lived out the faith on this earth in times past without whom we would not be here today.

And there are saints who are even more recent. For me, my father and mother whose faith surrounded me as a child and whose lives are an example I constantly fail to live up to ... and a dear friend, the minister under whom I found my own call to ministry. Their journey is the foundation for my journey.

So what about you? Who are the saints you remember? Who are the people in your life who brought you to this place today so that here you are in church this morning to worship and praise God, hear God's word, and celebrate God's love and grace?

These are saints whose names may not be recorded in the church history books, but whose names are certainly written in the Book of Life, and whose names and faces are recorded in our hearts and our memories.

Some of them are long gone and long forgotten, others are more recently departed whom we remember today, and some of them are still alive and still play a part in our lives.

But the one thing that all these saints have in common is their love for the Lord, and their willingness to allow the Lord to use them in reaching out to and ministering to others, allowing the grace, love, compassion, and generosity of God to shine through them and flow out from them to us and to those around us.

Like a stained glass window in church depicting the saints of times past, what makes them a saint is that the light shines through.

But on this All Saints' Sunday, as we remember the special people in our lives, we remember too that the word "saint" does not mean some especially holy person, but rather it describes someone who loved the Lord and aims to live their life by faith, however often they might fall and fail. So here this morning, we remember the saints of the past, but we too are saints who are part of this tradition.

And perhaps therefore, the question for us today, posed by the memory of saints who have gone is... "Will anyone remember me? Will I be remembered with fondness and gratitude and thanksgiving on some All Saints' Day 10, 20, 40 or 500 years from now?"

I find it humbling to consider that I am part of a great tradition that goes back thousands of years and which lives on in you, and me, and all who profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. But I also find it challenging. I would like to think that I might make a difference in someone's life. That my presence or prayers or practice of faith might be an inspiration to those who come after me. That challenge is before us all today as we consider the saints of the Church. How might we live our lives, that those who observe us, or live with us, or walk beside us day by day, might find in us some of that glorious light of heaven that speaks to them of God and brings grace and healing into their lives. Who are the Saints? We are! Let's show that to the world!