



All Saints Day

Sermon by Ven Moses Thabethe



Sunday 31 October 2021

READINGS

Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 24; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44

All Saints

The Feast of All Saints invites us to look back while we live in the present. It is the most comprehensive of all commemorations in the church year. While most feast days remember a moment in Jesus' earthly life, or the people who knew him, All Saints Day remembers all the faithfully departed in the church, that great cloud of witnesses who in their earthly life were particularly shining examples of life in Christ.

In early Christian tradition, saints' days began as a way to mark the anniversary of a martyr's death — his or her "birthday" as a saint. By the middle of the church's first millennium, there were so many martyrs (particularly due to the persecution of the Roman Empire) that it was hard to give them all their due honour and recognition. All Saints' Day was therefore established as an opportunity to honour all the saints, known and unknown. As we celebrate All Saint's Sunday we remember those who have lived out lives of holiness and we are invited to consider our own response to that calling to be counted amongst the saints. In the letter to the Hebrews there is a directive to pursue peace and holiness, without which, we are told, no one will see the Lord. It is a warning that in order to be inheritors of the Kingdom of God we are not to reject this gift of grace.

Today we give thanks for the extraordinary out pouring of God's grace upon human lives. The work of the Holy Spirit transforming the actions of ordinary men and women, over centuries of Christian witness. In the words of a beautiful funeral prayer we recall those who shine like stars for all eternity – this is an image that means so much to me because I love watching the stars during a clear evening sky. So, every time I look up in the night sky, I'm reminded of the power of the Holy Spirit who transformed ordinary men and women into the saints we so revere today. But perhaps more importantly our celebration invites us to consider how we too might become living witnesses to holiness and bearers of the light of Christ. There was a time when local saints and martyrs were the source of inspiration and legendary stories in the day to day of hum drum living.

They found in their local narratives of holy men and women stories of triumph over adversity, acts of glorious heroism in the battles against injustice and examples of renewed hope and goodness in the midst of selfishness, greed and the darkness of the world. The saints depicted in stained glass and in intricate carvings recorded marvelous stories of a better way and a brighter future. But, we are all called to be saints and named so through baptism.

So, before we imagine that saintliness and holiness are unattainable to us ordinary folks, let us remember some of the ordinary men and women of years gone by whose lives were not without blemish: Or what about St Gilbert of Sempringham, who began life as a sullen child who neglected his studies and was a disappointment to his Father? Or the famous St Francis of Assisi described as physically unattractive, possessing no particular gifts or capacities in his youth? Or St Ignatius of Loyola who was badly disfigured in battle as a young man taking a blow from a cannon ball the size of a fist. It ended his great dream of being a heroic knight.

It is worth pondering the fact that God so often chooses the most unlikely individuals as channels of grace and holiness. All of us are the earthen vessels which have the potential to contain the treasures of the Kingdom. Gilbert of Sempringham in a great journey of spiritual conversion, proving his father wrong, went on to be a radical and inclusive educator of girls and boys, both rich and poor, and the founder of the first and only English religious order in the Middle Ages. St Francis became one of the greatest reformers of his age. The gift of St Ignatius to the church was his profound writing on prayer in his book *The Spiritual Exercises*.

In our own parts, here in South Africa, 1928, GaMarishane in Polokwane, Manche Masemola, a young girl who was beaten to death by her own parents because she refused to give up her Christian faith and her allegiance to Christ and her desire for baptism. Or Benedict Daswa, a South African school teacher and principal in Venda and a fervent Christian believer, who was murdered by a local mob in 1990 after he refused to pay a tax designed to ward off lightning. Heavy rains and lightning strikes plagued the area and when his village suffered strong storms in January of that year, the elders decided that the lightning occurred due to magic and thus demanded a tax from all their residents to pay for a sangoma to "sniff out" the witch who caused the storms. Daswa refused to pay the tax and thus was stoned and beaten to death.

All of these ordinary men and women faced tough journeys of soul searching in their lives borne of a growing dissatisfaction about the world they encountered. It led to transformation not only of themselves but the many who reflected on their stories and found in them a source of encouragement for their own commitment to Christ. For centuries the acts of the apostles, the holiness of the Saints and the blood of the martyrs inspired the church with a eagerness to follow in their footsteps. It gave them the faith to believe that nothing is impossible for God. That humanity really can soar to the heights of heaven, share in the life of God and make a difference in the world. With the enlightenment, saints lost their dazzle and the interest turned to scientists, inventors and explorers to be the great lives that children sought to follow. Next it was the glamour of the Hollywood movie stars.

And in recent times adulation and honour has been directed sports stars (footballers, cricketers, rugby, tennis) and celebrities. Saintliness is no longer fashionable in our days. The abuse of power and the lack of religious devotion often leads to scandal and shame. We inhabit a world full of uncertainty, disappointment, bad behaviour and an increasing moral bankruptcy. When great institutions and those who are meant to be the examples in society are exposed for all their human frailty and weakness, our disillusionment takes a hold and our faith in humanity wanes – quite poignant as we head towards local elections tomorrow! Who can we trust to bequeath political power in order to lead with integrity and a spirit of servanthood?

But we are a people of hope and it is heartening to know that people still look to holy places and holy people in the search for beacons of light and as sources of inspiration and hope. Every day both pilgrims and seekers post up prayers of thanksgiving and encouragement on social media and in person, to celebrate the out pouring of God's grace in their lives and the lives of those for whom they care.

Occasionally, members of this Parish community gather to pray for the transformation of the world and the renewal of lives. Each day, as we pause in the middle of the day, we join millions of Christians around the world in praying for the renewal and transformation of our nations across the globe. And no matter how dark or uncertain life may be, we, as living witnesses to grace and renewal have a powerful message to share. It requires us to be confident and obedient to our calling, keeping faith, celebrating goodness, drawing alongside the lost and the perplexed with the life giving words about the message and story of Christ.

As we celebrate the Eucharist today and every Sunday, we declare that despite our human frailty and our failure to live lives of holiness, every day is a day to begin again with God. This is expressed in today's Gospel story of the raising of Lazarus. As we enter into the story, we can feel the grief and sorrow and anger at how death takes away, at least in physical form, the people we love. This is clearly articulated in Mary's words to Jesus: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus doesn't directly respond to this. Instead, he begins to take charge, first finding out where Lazarus' body is and then issuing a series of commands:

Take away the stone

Lazarus, come out

Unbind him, and let him go

Each of these commands offers good material for our own prayer life. When we pray, just like when we receive the sacraments, we are closer to the saints because we are placing our hearts and minds nearer to the presence of God. When Jesus raised Lazarus his friend, he did this so that the crowds back then, and you and me today, might believe, might trust in the God who sent Jesus raise the dead, just like Jesus would be raised on the third day so that death could be swallowed up forever. This story inspires us in our waiting, in our hoping, in our trusting in the joyful life of the Kingdom which is both here and not yet fully realized – we catch a glimpse of it when we join in that chorus of angel voices: "Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts: Heaven and earth are full of your glory".

And we join in this chorus, seeking to be ordinary every day saints, busy making Christ known: proclaiming hope, brokering peace, exercising forgiveness, making sacrifices for the sake of the Gospel and demonstrating Christ's radical message of love.

And so we pray,

"God of holiness,

Your glory is proclaimed in every age:

As we rejoice in the faith of your saints,

Inspire us to follow their example,

With boldness and joy."