

All Saints Day, St Luke's 2022

Who are the saints? What does it mean to be a saint? Talk of “saints” can quickly conjure up uneasy images of religious devotions: prayers to saints, veneration of relics, and the constant observation of saint days. At its most caricatured, the Saints themselves become the object of our worship. God becomes an unapproachable deity, who we only dare contact by asking these holy do-gooders to put in a good word on behalf of us regular no-hopers.

But today, on All Saints Day, we affirm that *we are all saints*. In baptism we are joined to Christ's holy Body, the church. Or, as the collect puts it; God has “knit together his elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of his Son, Christ our Lord.”

We are probably all painfully aware, however, that our lives do not always seem “saintly.” As Martin Luther points out, we are, each of us, always simultaneously sinners and saints. Our sanctification into holiness is not a straightforward journey, in which progress can be easily identified. And it might be easy to despair. How can any of us live the life we are called into by Christ?

But, perhaps in our sense of despair, the saints are not a condemning reminder that we could never be like them, but rather an encouragement that God really can take ordinary lives and make them shine with his glory.

During this Black History Month, we recall those great figures like Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, or Nelson Mandela who made credible a life of dignity for black people within deeply racist societies. Though ordinary and flawed people, their lives have become tangible examples and an ongoing source of encouragement that a different, more just way of life is possible. So too, the church recalls saints who make *credible* the life of Jesus within the ordinariness of everyday lives.

Herein lies the significance of the saints. Without losing this important point that we are all God's saints and called to holiness, we recognise that there are some in whom the light of Christ burns so brightly that we dare to call them St. so and so.

We do not completely flatten the horizon. But we affirm that such and such a life *really did* make the life of Jesus Christ more *credible*, more visible among us.

To do so, is not to place that person on a pedestal, but to proclaim something about *God*— who is able to take ordinary lives, and make them alive and burn brightly with the life of Christ! Thus, if God can work in the brokenness of ordinary human lives, to shine with his extraordinary glory, then why can't the same be true for you and I?

But, before we return to thinking that being a saint is about being heroically holy and pious, a status reserved only for the holiest of do-gooders, we should remind ourselves that sainthood is not to do with piety, but with *love*. Specifically, an openness to God's love. Being holy, is not about being ethically pristine, but almost it's opposite. The holiest people I know are those who are *most aware of their own brokenness*, their own need for God's grace. Because it is precisely in this awareness and acknowledgement of dependency, that allows the light of Christ to flood their lives.

As St Thérèse of Lisieux said towards the end of her life; “No, I’m not a saint; I’ve never performed the actions of a saint. I’m a very little soul upon whom God has bestowed graces; that’s what I am. What I say is the truth; you’ll see this in heaven.”

Being a saint is not, therefore, about our own ethical striving. It is to trust that our life is found in Christ, and so we share in *his* holiness, *his* righteousness.

The holiness assumed in sainthood is not something *earned*, through hard-work and striving, but something *given, received, inherited* (as St Paul puts it).

In Christ we have obtained an inheritance... our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people. The hope to which we are called... the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints.

Like a marriage between an infinitely wealthy person to their beloved who has become hopelessly ensnared in debt. It is not simply that their debts are cleared, but they inherit all the riches of the other through their marriage. So too, being a member of the Body of Christ, is not simply about sins being forgiven, as if we've been returned to a “neutral state” and then set on our way. Being “in Christ” is to inherit the wealth and riches of his relationship with God; standing where Jesus stands, as beloved children of God, invited to call God “Father.” And if God is “Our Father,” then that makes us brothers and sisters, bound together in Christ, sealed by his Spirit, within this shared relationship with the Father. A communion of Saints.

So, if you are feeling unworthy, wanting to weep, feeling without resources, empty-handed, and sensing the exclusion of others, this is paradoxically where God is able to get at us most easily— where we can know most deeply God's blessing, because it is here that we are most aware of our dependency and need for his grace.

But woe to us if we consider ourselves as especially saintly, holy or superior, for it is here that we close our hands to receive God's blessing, to share the inheritance with the saints.

For, as another Saint, Henry Newman, reminds us, though like a magnifying glass, we ourselves may feel cold, insofar as we remain open to God's light, there is no limit to how God's glory may burn through us.

Amen.