

All Saints' Day 2022

An unusual question, seldom asked in the Presbyterian climes of the Church of Scotland of my youth, but perhaps a good question today: *Who is your favourite saint?*

Somebody from long ago, perhaps? St Mary, St Paul, St Francis of Assisi, St Columba?

Or somebody who lived fairly recently: Oscar Romero, Mother Theresa?

More daringly, is it perhaps somebody we have the privilege to know personally?

Over the past years, Revd David has been encouraging us to examine our Christian identities. Who exactly are we, we 21st Century Christ followers?

Followers and believers: certainly

Plodders and doubters: sometimes

Disciples? People seemed to really struggle with this concept as they felt that disciples were a breed apart and the feeling of 'not good enough' hampers us from realising that that's exactly who we are! On the road of learning what it is to be like Jesus.

But are we all SAINTS? Hmm. Now that's a stretch. Certainly not the sort of saints who have been through the Vatican beatification process, but saint in the sense that we are blessed by God for his work. Is that better?

So, what makes a saint? Ordinary folk doing, saying, writing, bearing extraordinary things. Why? Because their first order of business is to follow the Master, to do what Jesus did and to continue his work, healing, transforming, telling the good gospel news, making disciples.

How? In and through the power of the Holy Spirit God's people are able to do things not possible in their own strength alone.

And after all is done there is the promise of being in God's loving, living presence for ever.

'The saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever, yes, for ever and ever!' says the Book of Daniel.

Luke says: *'the kingdom for the poor, satisfaction for those who hunger, laughter for those who weep, joy for the persecuted.'*

These promises of eternal worth coupled with the fact that we are blessed in the present and empowered right now to be God's saints is what keeps us going, perhaps.

But note that St Luke is brutally honest about what life is like right now. In the real world we'll be poor, grief stricken, in despair, hungering for food or love or justice, bowed under oppression and injustice.

Following Jesus doesn't mean an easy journey. He never promised us that! Indeed, we may find the road through life steeper, rockier, harder and more dangerous just because we belong to him. Anyway, bad things happen to good people. Why should Christian be different?

After all, Jesus the teacher, the healer, the man of compassion suffered injustice, torture and death. He has set the tone for us, so we walk his way with no false assumptions of an easy life.

St Stephen was stoned to death for unswerving faith. *I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.*

St Paul was beaten, imprisoned, shipwrecked and eventually martyred for proclaiming Christ's way. And he could count all else as loss for the sake of following his Lord.

Through the ages people have suffered for their faith. It's often said that the blood of the martyrs makes the church strong. Through the ages, God's saints have transformed unjust structures in society. They've brought healing and hope to the sick, to the outcasts, the leprous, the homeless, the poor, the hungry.

Each of the famous saints has their own story to tell. Find a book or go on line and be amazed! Their stories are important as we can learn so much about how God works wonders through his people.

But I'd also encourage us to ask one another to tell our stories. Because our stories are important too! God is working here and now, even in these days of difficulty and uncertainty. Ask Roger or Wendy or Bill and Tanya. Ask our Ukrainian visitors what God has been doing for them and through them. Let's take time to look at our own life stories! How has God made a difference in my life and how have I helped to make a difference for others?

Life is often very hard, but we need to hang on in there. God knows our pain, and the road may be long and lonely and ugly, but we have the example of the saints around us to encourage us.

The American hymn writer Horatio Spafford lost a son to scarlet fever and four daughters in a tragic collision of ships at sea. His response to these immense losses? Did he blame God? He was deeply, deeply bereft, yet he could write:

*When peace like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll
Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to know
It is well, it is well, with my soul.*

This hymn has comforted many through the years. Spafford and his wife went on to have other children, to adopt orphans and to give a home to outcast families in the Middle East. What a story of God's power and love turning tragedy into blessing.

Life can be horrifically hard. For some of us much harder than for others. And if things are on a fairly even keel for us at the moment, we need to avoid the dangers of complaisance and self-satisfaction. Instead we need to be generous givers of compassion, time, financial support and our God-given talents as we become beacons of hope in a dark world.

We are ordinary people who celebrate the lives of the saints today as we give thanks for their extraordinary example of faith and life. Ordinary, wonderful, transformational, miraculous.

But we too are saints! Ordinary folks who are called to live out extraordinary lives of love, integrity, courage, generosity, kindness and faith. For Christ and in the name of Christ.

Who is your favourite saint? Let's go and be saints too! Amen.