

All Saints 5 Nov 2017

All Saints [Revelation 7:9-17](#), [Psalm 34:1-10, 22](#), [1 John 3:1-3](#), [Matthew 5:1-12](#) Vanderbilt Lectionary

[All Saints](#) Textweek

Today we celebrate All Saints' Day. All Saints. Not just one saint. All Saints.

But who are these saints? The Book of the Revelation of Saint John the Divine has a wonderful passage which we heard this morning. It's in chapter 7. We're told that a great multitude, which no-one could count, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, and cried with a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'

Now the thing about this passage is that all these people are the saints. There's no thought that only some are saints. The great multitude no-one could count represents all the faithful. John has heard, he says, that there are one hundred and forty-four thousand, but he sees an uncountable multitude, who are not limited to the people of Israel. This multitude is made up of people of all nations, all faiths, and of all degrees of faith, whose number is as huge as God's love is unlimited. It's a number great enough to include us.

So All Saints' Day is different from all other saints' days because today we celebrate a day which we are told includes us. We celebrate a constituency to which we belong. We are members of the group we celebrate. So today is our day - our festival - our 'one day of the year.'

But wait, we say. It's very nice being scooped up like this - a great compliment - but surely sainthood is reserved for those extraordinary people whose lives and works have transformed the world - those who have a day a year allocated to them in church calendars, have special prayers written about them, churches named after them, and who've finished up glowing out of stained glass windows. The heroes of the church. So how come we're talking about an uncountable multitude that includes us?

Well, here's a way of looking at sainthood that might be helpful.

If we had to describe our life in terms of faith, we could say it's the drama of God being with us, being united with us - being inside us, and - being at our side. Within us, and within our community is the place where God chooses to dwell. Which means that God places himself in our hands as an absolute gift. And so God acts in us, and through us. And this makes it possible for us to be part of God's creative, redemptive and inspiring purpose. This doesn't mean our actions are automatically united with those of God. But it does mean that 'endowed within us' is the potential for being his love in the world.

How we respond to our God-given potential is up to us. We can ignore it. Or we can try to respond to it as positively as we can. What's certain, though, we believe, is that God's spirit, God's initiative is embedded in us.

And we could also say that all those types who have had festivals, prayers, hymns and stained glass windows dedicated to them are those that have recognised unequivocally this divine potential within themselves, and have lived it out to the full. And made a pretty dynamic impression.

Fair enough. But where do we fit in? We're a motley crew. Very here and there. But here's the remarkable thing. For all our failures and shortcomings, we're not discarded. In fact, we're welcomed.

St Augustine thought of the history of the human family as a vast musical score in which all our wrong notes and bad rhythms and harmonic gaffs - consecutive fifths and augmented fourths and so on - all very bad - were transformed by God into a wonderful work of art. In *De Musica* he wrote, 'Dissonance can be redeemed without being obliterated.' It's as though our relationship with God is like a great symphony that contains all our errors, bad notes, failures, and disgraces, but from which a work of great beauty finally emerges. And the victory isn't that God rubs out our wrong notes, our missteps, our failures, or pretends that they never happened, but that God finds a place for them in the musical score that redeems them. This is the way God works. None of us is ever a write-off. And in any case, God could never disown us, for his essence is implanted in us. If he disowned us, he'd be disowning himself, for he's in us, at our core.

And so what's important is that, for all our shortcomings and faults, and our lack of angelic achievement that might have seen us into a stained glass window, we're nevertheless able to live out the God who is in us, as faithfully as we can. How does this work?

Well, we have it in us to see that which is of God in others, just as God sees and loves that which is of him in us – that which transforms us into his likeness.

We have it in us to accept the failures of others, and never to see others as failures – to accept the weakness of others, and never to condemn others as weak.

We have it in us never to disown others, for others are of God, just as we are of God.

We have it in us to take to ourselves the catastrophes of others, take them to our hearts, and transform them there in the name of the love who is our love and theirs.

We have it in us to deal with others on the basis of their failures and betrayals, and welcome them as opportunities for love, just as God deals with us on the basis of our failures and betrayals, and welcomes them as opportunities for love.

We have it in us, because what is in us is of God.

St Ignatius of Loyola reminds us that the final stage of advancement in the spiritual life is being able constantly to contemplate God in every creature, and then to revere God in every creature. And being able to revere God in every creature is the distinguishing quality which characterised that innumerable multitude of saints of which today's celebration of All Saints invites us to be a part. For it is as we revere God in every creature that we become united with that innumerable multitude which fell before the throne, worshipping God, and saying, 'Amen; blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever.'

Amen.

St Paul's Beaconsfield

5 November 2017

John Shepherd

