

**May I speak in the name of the living God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.**

If you or I were to ask somebody in the street who the Saints are – we would get many different answers.

Some will say that they are a pop group.

Others will say a football team.

Many will say that they are especially holy men and women who lived a long time ago.

Each of these answers has an element of truth in it. However, I want us to think about the answer that St Paul would have given to this question. To St Paul and indeed each of the writers of the letters in the New Testament, the saints were men and women who had become members of the church, and who were trying to live out the gospel principles in their daily lives.

They were not especially holy people. They were not people who lived a long time ago, they were the people in St Paul's present day, who were committed to being followers of Christ.

I believe that we can learn a lot from St Paul's view of saints. It means that our commemoration of All Saint's Day today, is not just about looking back at the lives of men and women who lived hundreds of years ago.

It is about celebrating the fact that God's Spirit works in and through men and women in every generation, as they are called, equipped and empowered to share in the building of God's kingdom.

All Saint's Sunday, then is about the past, present and future – acknowledging that we all have a special part to play in building God's eternal kingdom.

There are many themes that could be picked up in a sermon on All Saints Sunday.

As I reflected on our two readings set for today, I was struck by the tension they present to us and in which we as Christians are called to live:

the reading from Revelation provides us with a glorious vision of God's heavenly kingdom, in which all things are made new.

In the opening words of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, recorded by Matthew, we are presented with the challenge that God's blessings lie, not with the rich and powerful but on the poor, the hungry, the tearful, and those who are persecuted.

We celebrate the saints because they, in their different lives have found the way to hold together this tension – pointing us towards God's Kingdom, at the same time as making God's love and presence tangible in the here and now.

Sometime ago, Canon Rosalind Brown, who I knew while I was serving as a curate in Salisbury Diocese, had the opportunity to stay in Soweto during her visit to the diocese of Johannesburg. She stayed in a house in the next street to Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu's homes - the only street in the world that can claim to be home to two Nobel Peace Prize winners. She says that there was an incredible sense of being where history was made, of treading where saints of our own age have trod.

Whilst there, she preached at Holy Cross Church which was in the news during those terrible days in 1976 because the first schoolboy to die in the school children's (until that moment peaceful) march was shot right outside its doors. Today there is a large museum named after him, the Hector Pieterse Museum, across the road from the church which tells the story of the Soweto children's march and the subsequent bloody events.

Rosalind tells how the service, in true African style, lasted three hours and there was much singing and dancing. Afterwards, the parish priest explained that the people do not want the service to end because for them it is a foretaste of heaven come on earth, it is the high point of their week when they can put behind them the difficulties of daily life and for three hours be lifted up into heavenly places, catching a glimpse of the hope to which they are called.

I recently had the opportunity to visit a number of churches in London. Westminster Abbey, St Matthew's Westminster, and the Chapel of St Stephen's in the Houses of Parliament. Each of them is very beautifully decorated - Stained glass windows, artwork, and architecture all combine to speak of the majesty and beauty of God.

In the midst of the hustle and bustle of every day life in the city, these churches and chapels, like so many up and down our country, represent a place of peace and tranquility, which point us towards something beyond the here and now, and at the same time, help us to feel a closer sense of God's love and presence with us in the present.

In both these cases there is a human foretaste of heaven - in the worship of a church in an African township ravaged by HIV AIDS and previously imprisoned in the injustice of apartheid, and in the human creativity of men and women who point us through their art to the divine beauty that transcends time and space.

This brings us back to All Saints Day and to the challenge our two readings present to us as we think about the saints.

Saints are people who hold together the promise of our inheritance in heaven as described in that vision from the book of Revelation; and the challenging words of Jesus about where God's blessing lies, not on the rich and powerful but on the poor, the hungry and the tearful.

And sometimes the saints are themselves the hungry and the tearful.

There has been much in the press over recent years about the fast-tracking of Mother Teresa to sainthood, but the secular press found it very difficult to cope with the so-called revelations that for most of her life Mother Teresa was serving the poor and giving herself to prayer at the same time that she was doubting God presence and care.

That seemed to the world as a negation of her faith and dedication, but for men and women of faith in every age, this has been a mark of the genuine struggle through which only a true and deep trust of God can grow.

Indeed our readings today point to the fact that the truth lies elsewhere: they remind us that Christians are called to hold all those truths together, that doubt and despair are not the negation of faith but at times integral components of it. And those we honour today as saints give us examples we can follow - because, in many cases, they struggled.

All the more famous saints began somewhere, doing whatever was in front of them and just keeping going faithfully; and if the saints offer us anything today, they offer us their example and their encouragement to begin wherever we are, however unpromising our raw materials.

November is a month for Remembering - all the saints today, Guy Fawkes tonight, and those who gave their lives in war, who we remember on Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday next weekend.

As we remember the Saints today, with gratitude and with determination to follow their example, may we be ready to embrace the challenge in our own lives to point towards God's kingdom, while making his love present and tangible in our own time.

Amen.