

Reflections and Prayers: For all the Saints

This is the 31st in a series of weekly Reflections and Prayers being offered to the Norley Methodist Church congregation and to colleagues and friends in many places near and far. They are kindly sourced by many people. You are invited to use them freely for personal reflection and to share and retain them as you wish.

They don't have a day of their own



In recent years, we have enjoyed watching (and some of you may even have participated in) marathons, such as in London from Greenwich to The Mall, and half-marathons, such as the Great North Run from Newcastle to South Shields. Preceded by the wheelchair athletes (because they're the fastest), the huge field is led by the elite runners from around the world, followed by thousands of ordinary people, many seeking to raise money for their chosen charities and some dressed in silly, but symbolic, outfits.

The 'elite' saints, often of biblical origin, have their own day each year. But, on November 1st, All Saints Day, we give thanks for and celebrate the lives of all the saints who don't have a day of their own and we include our personal saints, the thousands of good people, known only to us and to God.

John Bell, October 2020. Photo from BBC, as the runners cross the iconic bridge over the River Tyne.

What does a saint look like?

Do you know what a saint looks like? It's a serious question. Not because we can easily conjure up an image of a slightly forlorn soul looking heavenward but with gaze slightly averted as if she might catch a glimpse of an archangel. Saints invariably seem to grip a bible and some item that reflects a part of their life or death. In the case of St Catherine of Alexandria it is a wheel representing the manner of her death, for St Isidore of Seville it may be bees, for St Martin of Tours the cloak that he cut in two so as to clothe the beggar who sought charity, and if you see a camel then of course you think of St Menas - well you will now. There is always something to learn from the saints!

But a passing camel or a burst of fireworks from a wheel fastened to a garden fence post is hardly proof of a saint. We might wonder if those we know of as saints were recognised as such by their contemporaries – I am not sure they were for the simple reason that they were human beings. As Isaac Watts puts it, 'They wrestled hard, as we do now, with sins and doubts and fears.' (StF 747, R&S 664, v 2) Saints on the whole did not and do not wander the earth held a few inches above the ground by an aura of holiness, at least the saint I met did not and those we read of in the New Testament do not – think of Peter to start with.

I met a saint in 1996. He was late, rather hard of hearing, looked tired and was clearly grateful for his walking cane. He spoke of love and the urgent need to have a stronger unity of all Christians. I confess that the detail I have forgotten, but I still have the small present he gave me, and I do recall the intensity of his listening. I did not, however, know I was speaking to a saint. At the time of his earthly life he had his critics, a common feature of saints in every generation. Not being held above the dust of human experience saints did, and do, get dirty. They know sin. When it comes to saints of biblical times it is often the case that very little is known about them, after all we can sum up what is factually known about the likes of Matthew, Mary, Phoebe, Bartholomew in but a few sentences. The somewhat obscure Biblical saints we remember are simply those who are known to have walked with Jesus. The multitude of saints we give thanks for on All Saints Day are the unknown millions as well as those recorded in the history of the church who say, 'salvation belongs to our God'. They have been merciful, meek, single-minded, persecuted, but deeply, aware of God. In being so aware they help to make others aware, centuries later.

All Saints Day is a particular opportunity to celebrate those who have encouraged and inspired others; it is an opportunity to celebrate the mystery of holiness.

The saint I met was Pope John Paul II, brother in Christ who knew pain and struggles, and love and mercy while seeking to keep alive the faith in a communist Poland. He was canonised (made a saint) in 2014. He at least is the saint I met whom you have heard of, one whose holiness the Church has marked. It is less likely that you have heard of Betty Curtis, unless you shopped in T T Lloyds department store in Neath, South Wales, where she was a seamstress of local renown. That is not why I think of her as one who revealed holiness. Mrs Curtis taught me in the Primary Department of Neath Methodist Church Sunday School. She taught me the stories of Jesus, both as she read them and because she walked with the crucified, risen and ascended Christ. With eyes closed and hands together she was one of those who at various times in my life helped me to pray.

That's what saints do, women and men who have known the great mix of emotions they give us a glimpse of holiness in the midst of human muddle. Now, do you know what a saint looks like?

Revd Gareth Powell, October 2020. Gareth is a Methodist minister and former Secretary of the Conference.

One family, we dwell in him, One Church, above, beneath

As we celebrate All Saints Day, it's worth reading again chapter 7 of the Book of Revelation where we see two pictures of God's people. First, we have the 144,000. It does not mean there's a limited number who can be saved. It's not as if heaven has a big flashing "no vacancy" sign, and the rest of us are out of luck because the places are taken. It's a symbolic number – 12, the number of God's people throughout scripture – squared and multiplied by 1000. It stands for the totality of all God's people, the church, the chosen ones of God. Then there is the great multitude no one could count. And these are really the same people – God's people.

One of the elders asks, "who are they?" One wonders if John didn't recognize some of them. Perhaps as he looked on the crowd he saw Christian friends – apostles and martyrs who had gone before him. "Oh, there's Peter, there's Matthew. There's my brother James". Who are they? It's obvious. "Sir, you know" he says. But this moment is worth comment. Of all the visions in Revelation, few are explained to this extent. The elder makes it plain, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb". These are believers in the glory of eternal presence. These are, in fact, all the saints. Can you see their faces? There are God's people we've known and loved, people whom we name and remember associated with the life of this one church. And there, by the grace of God, we will be too. If we hold firm through the storms which surround us. And all the troubles of this world, COVID, BREXIT and all the social, political and economic uncertainties which threaten us, are compared to the glory revealed there. There, in the presence of God, there is no more pain, hunger, thirst, suffering or sorrow. Death shall be no more.

What a beautiful picture it is, that God will wipe every tear from our eyes! Like a loving parent whose kiss makes all the bad things go away and get better, but even more perfect and full. God's tender, loving, mercy will take away all cares and troubles, not just for a moment, but forever. It's almost impossible to comprehend. Death shall be no more.

By rights, heaven is already ours. We already stand in the merciful presence of God, by grace through faith. For we are accounted in the 144,000, the totality of God's people. One day we will see it in all its fullness, but we possess it even now. Yes, even now, God gives us a taste of it. We have the awareness of the forgiveness of our sins, and the peace with God that brings. We have the promises of blessings now and future, and in those words we trust. We have the hope of the resurrection, the certainty of things unseen.

Even now, before the great marriage feast, we have a foretaste, a token, of that heavenly banquet prepared for all. When we gather and receive the body and blood of Christ, we participate in the great communion of angels, archangels and all the company of heaven. It's as if the saints themselves are here with us, praising and thanking the God who has brought us salvation.

That's why we sing the same songs. Power and riches and wisdom and strength and honour and blessing and

glory to God and to the Lamb, forever and ever, amen. We, like the saints, may live forever. And that eternal life with God has already begun. Death shall be no more.

All Saints Day is then not a day to mourn or bemoan those who have departed this world, but a day to rejoice in triumph with those who have joined the everlasting company, the great multitude in the eternal presence of God. All saints – all holy people – who continuously praise the Holy One, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

We see images and visions with John of the glories of heaven: "I saw a new heaven and a new earth." We remember those who have died, this last year, and the years before us. We remember all who have struggled to listen to Jesus and be part of the Church despite the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil as the old baptism service put it. And that is our heritage, the heritage of the Church of which we are part. Tradition is a strange thing ... it is about remembering ... but more than that, it is about relationship.

G.K. Chesterton said, "**Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about.**"

That's us. On All Saints` Day we remember that we are part of a greater host, we who walk, standing in the footsteps of saints who know well how to struggle to be the church. We rejoice in their fellowship and we are inspired to be disciples of Christ. As Charles Wesley put it (StF 744, R&S 472, verse 2):

One family we dwell in him, one Church, above, beneath,
Though now divided by a stream, the narrow stream of death:
One army of the living God, to his command we bow;
Part of his host have crossed the flood, and part are crossing now.

Revd Tim Macquiban, October 2020. Tim retired to the North Cheshire Circuit in August 2019; his last appointment was minister at the Ponte Sant' Angelo Methodist Church in Rome.

Prayer of thanksgiving

As we picture them in our mind's eye, we give thanks for the people who have been saints for us, in our childhood, teenage years, and adult life;

- who encouraged us
- who warned us
- who pointed us to Jesus
- who were mentors and examples to us
- who inspired us
- who had time for us
- who challenged us
- who showed unconditional love for us
- who taught us how to pray
- who led us in our Christian pilgrimage
- who were, simply, saints for us.



We remember them with love and give thanks for them all, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

John Bell, October 2020. Photo by Joan Bell, Remembrance Sunday 2016, sunset over Charleston, South Carolina.

Note and encouragement to all readers

I have collected and compiled these reflections and prayers, including some of my own thoughts. If you wish to offer pieces for inclusion in future weeks, please send them to me at belljohna@btinternet.com Each edition will be released on a Friday so that it can be distributed for Sunday and the following week.

Hymns are referenced as far as possible from their most recent publication in a British Methodist hymnbook (Singing the Faith – StF, Hymns and Psalms – H&P or even the 1933 Methodist Hymn Book – MHB), and, for URC readers, in Rejoice and Sing (R&S), the URC's present hymnal.