

All Saints and All Souls

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Rev'd Rebecca Newland—Sunday, 3 November 2013

Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18; Psalm 149; Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 6:20-31

It's a day to remember—a day to remember all the people in our families and our past who have died, and to remember all the saints.

A day to remember: we remind ourselves of the fragility of our bodies; we remember the depths of love; we remember the ups and downs of relationships.

[Here Rebecca showed framed photographs of her grandmothers, and an old Bible left to her by one of them.] What did I learn from them? “If you can cook it keeps men happy” ... and “All things work together for good for those who love the Lord.”

When we think of those who have died, we are reminded that love and money can sustain life, but they cannot prevent death. We find ourselves thinking about how we might fit in to the Big Picture. We are forced to ask ourselves what we really believe about what happens after our last breath.

Take a moment of silence to think about those in your past who have taught you and formed you ...

And this is day to remember all the saints. This year we have been celebrating the major saints in the Christian calendar but today we remember them all.

So tell me, what makes a saint?

A saint is one who has been recognized for having an exceptional degree of holiness, sanctity, and virtue. They are holy, virtuous and lead lives that shine with God's love. Many religions have a term for those they see as saints. In the Jewish faith they are the *tzadik*, in Islamic the *wali*, in Hinduism the *rishi* or *guru*, and in Buddhism they are the *bodhisattva*.

In Christianity, “saint” has a wide variety of meanings, depending on its usage and the denomination. But the original Christian usage referred to any believer who is “in Christ” and in whom Christ dwells, whether in heaven or in earth. All baptized Christians are joined to Christ and the body of Christ, the church. So in one sense we are all saints!

Yet we seem to know that saints are special. They often are an example to others—just think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Martin Luther King Jr. They are often extraordinary teachers. One of mine is Evelyn Underhill. They sometimes show a wonderful and liberating detachment from worries about money and things.

However, for us today, I want to suggest two things that really make a saint stand out, two things that any person can do and practice, two things that make the difference between a life that is on the way to being transformed and sanctified and one that is stalled.

The two things are forgiveness and praise.

Forgiveness

I ask you recall what is right in the middle of the Lord's prayer. It is "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us". Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, a Russian Orthodox writer, likened the Lord's prayer to a ladder that stretches from heaven to earth and earth to heaven. In the Orthodox faith, we saints are on a journey to oneness with God, journey of becoming more and more Christ-like as we love as he loved. We are like the ancient Hebrews, who are on a journey from bondage in Egypt, through the wilderness and on to the promised land.

So you can read the Lord's prayer from the bottom up—as in we are saved from all that binds and enslaves us and eventually find our true being in God, our Father in heaven. You can also read the prayer from the top down—as the journey of Christ to us who comes to us and calls us into fullness of life. But right in the middle of either journey, up or down, is the call to forgive.

Metropolitan Antony calls this prayer about forgiveness the line of demarcation between slavery and freedom. If as we look to the future we look back at the past and take with us our hatreds, our grievances, our resentments and our fears we will never be free. We will always be slaves in the promised land. Not only that, if we do not forgive then we are not forgiven. Not because God doesn't want to forgive, but because our unforgiving checks the mystery of love. It is as if we put the brakes on God's love in our lives by our unforgiveness. 'We cannot go further if we have not forgiven, and we cannot be forgiven as long as we have not forgiven every one of those who have wronged us.' To forgive one's enemies is the first, the most, elementary characteristic of a Christian, of a saint; failing this we are not yet Christian at all, but are still wandering in the scorching wilderness of Sinai.

This is hard, I know. Even when we think we have forgiven sometimes we have really only put the other person on probation or even remand. We wait impatiently to see the evidence that the person has changed or repented; we want to be sure the person is different. Friends, this can last a lifetime. Some people never change and you can waste your whole life wishing they were different and things had never happened.

It's also not what Christ taught. He said do to others as you would have them do to you. He said love your enemies. Pray for them. Do good to those who hate you. And he prayed these extraordinary words in his darkest hour: "Forgive them father for they know not what they do." Jesus didn't wait for those who had betrayed him and killed him to work out that they had done the wrong thing. He forgave them from the cross. It's only in forgiving others that we are free and fully able to love as Christ loved us; his great command to his disciples was to love one another as he loved them. Metropolitan Antony says this law of forgiveness is not a little boundary between slavery and freedom; it has breadth and depth, it is the Red Sea of our faith, and it is only by crossing it that we become saints.

Perhaps this, then, is a good day to bring to mind those people in your past, in your present, with whom you have some type of negative history—a hurt perhaps, a resentment—someone in the church, someone in your family perhaps or circle of friends—and forgive them. If you just cannot forgive them, then at the very least pray for them. As we pray for these people in our lives, the Holy Spirit will eventually lead our hearts to forgive. As we truly forgive we are released, we release ourselves, and God's power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

Praise

This gift of forgiveness, this liberation and peace, is the heart of the gospel for by this forgiveness we participate in God's kingdom of peace and reconciliation. It is God's kingdom that compels the saints and angels to sing—Holy, holy, holy Lord.

In the end forgiveness leads us to reconciliation with God and all creation and we finally find ourselves in our true home—praising God. We are created to praise God, to be in a loving, whole, relationship with the creator of all. Praise is the natural stance of the saint. We praise God in our words and in our deeds, with our mouths and with our bodies, with our creativity and our intellect—with all our being, as St Ignatius of Loyola said. We praise God in this life and then we join all the saints who have gone before, and all the angels, in a love-symphony and harmony of praise to God. What is beautiful and good and true joins together with God in the eternal wedding banquet.