

Why do we have a Patron?

St Philips Anglican Church, O'Connor

Saint Philip and Saint James — 7 May 2023

Reverend Martin Johnson

Isaiah 30.18-21; Psalm 19.1-6; 1 Corinthians 15.1-8; John 14.6-14

On Thursday I quoted a Swiss doctor who once said: “British doctors don’t know what tonsils are for, so they take them out; I don’t know what they are for, so I leave them in!” I wonder: can we apply this thinking to our patron and our patronal Festival? What are they for? We might well say ‘I don’t know, so let’s not bother’, or alternatively we might say, ‘I don’t know, so let’s leave things as they are’! Neither of these options is satisfactory. So why celebrate today? Why have a Patron?

In centuries past, that question would not have been asked, everyone knew our Patron was our man or woman on the inside, the one enjoying the beatific vision, the one in God’s closer presence and interceding on our behalf. At the Reformation, this kind of spirituality was called into question.

The saints loomed large in the piety of the mediaeval Church, too much so in the eyes of those wanting to reform what they saw as superstitious beliefs. I read recently of a Bishop from an English see travelling to the Vatican to secure a relic of St George. He was taken to spot deep within the bowels of the Vatican where a friar had charge of the relic repository; he asked if they had a relic of George. “Si, si,” said the friar . . . and the Dragon! I also have it on good authority that in America you can buy a statue of St Christopher that you can mount on your dashboard. It has a speed detector built into it and when you travel above the speed limit it speaks up, ‘you’re on your own buddy.’ Perhaps the reformers did have a point, after all!

We probably, first and foremost, want our patron to be an example to us, an exemplar. No bad thing, providing we don’t see the saints as perfect examples of Christian virtue; they were not. Philip, like his fellow disciples, despite everything he had seen, struggled to understand who exactly it was who had come among them, and was gently rebuked by Jesus. But perhaps that’s what we want from our saints; we need to hear their doubts and questions, their lack of faith. But that is not what makes them saints, there needs to be something else.

Today we will recite the Apostles’ Creed instead of the commonly used Nicene Creed. It contains that important clause ‘I believe in the Communion of Saints.’ I think this is helpful; perhaps we should recite it more often. Whilst we might well enjoy a particular saint whose life and witness has inspired us—I’d be keen to hear if you do—what is important is the ‘Communion of Saints.’ In the letter to the Hebrews, that rather mysterious book, the writer describes the lives of a whole list of Old Testament A-listers, and then says rather enigmatically ‘that their lives, apart from us, would not be made perfect.’ This is what the ‘Communion of Saints’ looks like—a gaggle of vastly different people whose lives are interconnected, all of whom perfect one another, make up for one another. Saints are not perfect, but they are in communion, they are one.

I was looking through a well-thumbed Bible the other day. It was the one I used as a student. It is covered with pencil notes. At the end of chapter 7 of Matthew’s gospel there are two arrows one pointing up and the other pointing down, and two words: ‘word’ pointing up to chapter 7 and ‘deed’ pointing down to chapter 8. At the end of Chapter 7 Jesus comes down from the mountain, the Sermon on the Mount is over, and now he begins to demonstrate the sermon in actions. He heals a leper and then is approached by a gentile, a centurion. Jesus

heals the centurion's servant and then says in response to this Roman soldier's great faith: "I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven."

At the close of Matthew's gospel Jesus tells his disciples to "go and make disciples of all nations" and we can see this gathering in John's great vision in the Book of Revelation:

...the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. They sing a new song:

'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth.'

Between Jesus' words to the centurion and the vision of John in Revelation we have Paul's letters. Today we hear Paul describing the creation of this community. Back to our question, what does mean for us? Why do we have a patron and a patronal festival? We celebrate today because of the gospel imperative for unity. Jesus gathered a multi-ethnic, multiracial group around him. Philip was a part of that, probably of Greek extraction. James the less was probably of Hebrew stock. Paul understands this and his call was for the creation of multicultural communities. We can see it too at Pentecost. The Communion of Saints is this vast multicultural gathering of all people, the living, those who have been, and those who are yet to be. We celebrate saints and have a patron because they are our link, they are at one with us and those before us and those who come after.

The gospel imperative is unity, and the Communion of Saints describes just that. To be a saint is to be in Communion, for us to believe in that communion is to be one with them—Philip and all the rest. I for one am rather unreformed when it comes to the saints, I do own a secondary relic! They are friends who pray for us, just as we pray for our family and friends. But above all, they are that great multitude of every tribe and language and people and nation. They are us and that is why we celebrate them today and enjoy the patronage of those whose lives are inspirational, those whose lives perfect ours just as we perfect theirs. I believe in the Communion of Saints. Amen.