

A community of faith and commitment

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2nd November 2008, All Saints

Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10; 22; 1John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

One of the great privileges of working for an ecumenical organisation — being part of the formal structures of the ecumenical movement — as I was for a couple of decades, is that you fell part of a world-wide Church in all its extraordinary diversity. Some of you remember the Seventh Assembly of the WCC here in Canberra in 1991. If you do, you will have memories of experiencing the Church in all its difference, its vibrancy, its colour, its tensions. And you will have your memories of such assemblies being vital international expressions of the world-wide ecumenical movement, as it seeks to be an instrument of God in bringing about transformation.

Since then, there have been two more Assemblies: in 1998 and 2006. In preparation for the most recent one, there was a project, "Keeping the Faith", designed to show the reality, and convey the vitality, of the ecumenical movement today. Yes, 'vitality'! That project explored the reality of the living church in various cultural contexts throughout the world: the reality of people, their faith and their communities, engaging in dialogue, working in mission, praying together, facing conflict and violence, poverty and illness, and responding to a rapidly changing world. It offered a glimpse of the immense spiritual riches and cultural diversity within the ecumenical movement and the Christian world.

We are part of that whole *oikoumene*, and such gatherings are signs of who we are:

people who belong together as members of a wonderfully and richly diverse faith community that has struggled through the centuries, and goes on struggling to be faithful to Christ's gospel of reconciliation and hope.

It is that understanding of ourselves that we celebrate on the Festival of All Saints. We are caught up in, indeed, *we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses* (Heb.), for *there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages*.

On this day, we celebrate our belonging to a community of faith — made up of people of faith and commitment — that has lived and struggled throughout the centuries, and continues to live and to struggle in faith in every part of the world now, at this time in history, in this first decade of the third millennium of our faith story.

Commemorating and celebrating the lives of the saints across the centuries **first** of all invites us to broaden and deepen our understanding of the Church's character. Neither the Church, nor the Christian life that goes on within it, is meant to exemplify some narrow, monochrome, parochial pattern, but is broad and diverse and universal in character. The extraordinary variety of those whom the Church calls 'saints' is sufficient warning against any rigidly narrow idea of the Church, which must rather be comprehensive enough to contain and encourage within itself the great variety/diversity of potentialities that are to be found in human lives.

Secondly, the Festival of All Saints invites us to consider just who were these people we call 'saints'. The name has been used in two principal ways. In the NT, it was applied to every Christian. They formed in each city the Community of the Spirit, and so they were thought of as the 'saints' of Jerusalem, of Antioch or of anywhere else. But in later and more common usage, the name stands for those whom the Church recognises as having specially manifested the gifts of the Spirit in their own lives and as having been conformed to Christ. So they are

regarded as those who, in their life, have entered into a closeness of relation with God such that they have reflected something of the holiness of God. With all their extraordinary diversity of human gifts and callings, the lives of the saints testify to the presence of the empowering love of God in the world. And they have an affinity with us as the Church today insofar as the characteristics, which they manifested, should be seen to be emerging in the whole body of Christians — the Church, the faith community. The saints are a "cloud of witnesses" which surrounds the Church in every time and place, and they show, as it were, what is going on in the Church and to what quality of life we are called and to which we are being beckoned by God — to be the holy ones, the Kingdom people, in our day.

A clue about this quality of life is found in the gospel reading. In the opening sentence we hear that *when he saw the crowds ... his disciples came to him*. And in the words that follow, Jesus shows what the kingdom of God looks like. The tone is being set for his ministry: He began to teach them, saying, *'Blessed are ...'*. By the end of the 'sermon', the crowds will be astonished at his teaching. It will strike a strong chord with all who "listen in".

The blessedness of the blessed is simply this: everything that Jesus now speaks has its heart and core in the speaker. If one wants to know about poverty of spirit, appropriate mourning, godly meekness, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, divine mercy, purity of the highest sort, the making of genuine peace, the willingness to suffer for righteousness, one dare not look within one's own self, for these things will not be found there to any great extent. One must look to the one who speaks these words, finding in him all that permeates these declarations of blessedness. These words will mark his entire ministry.

And they are to be the marks of those to whom he ministers. For in his life, suffering, death and resurrection, one finds a transforming power that turns life inside out, replacing the emptiness of our human frailties with the fullness of the grace and mercy of the God who first created us and who alone can re-create in us a sense of completeness that cannot be found anywhere else.

When we speak of 'saints' on this day, we speak of all who have been caught up in this urgent longing for, and seeking after, that glorious presence. But in the Beatitudes, the heart of the Gospel that enlivens and blesses all the children of God is found. These 'exclamations' are not a set of self-help sayings; **nor** are they philosophical reflections on ways to govern life; **nor** are they therapeutic ways of correcting dysfunctional lives; **nor** are they simply information about what would make life better; **nor** are they even a prescription for godly living. They are first and above all the way the Gospel looks when it appears in the person of Jesus from whose lips they come. They are, at the same time, the way the Gospel looks when the Christ lives within us, filling our life with a divine presence. The saints are those who are indeed blessed, for they have been — are — filled full.

Of course, what we are talking about when we start talking about living like this is a radically different culture to the mainstream culture around us. We are talking about living by a whole new value system. And it is very difficult — indeed, impossible — to live this out for long on one's own. That is why the faith community, and belonging to such a community, is so essential. As those, whom we celebrate today as 'saints', have invariably known: it is vital to be people who belong together as members of a wonderfully and richly diverse faith community — the Church — that has struggled through the centuries, and goes on struggling, to be faithful to Christ's gospel of reconciliation and hope.

But this community is not just one that exists by being together once a week for a couple of hours. If we are to be people who live by a whole new value system — radically different from the mainstream of our culture — if we are talking about being Kingdom people, people

of the Beatitudes — then we are talking about seeking to create a community of people sufficiently inter-connected with one another that you can support and nurture and encourage one another in living prayerfully and generously and hospitably.

That is what this All Saints' festival is about. It is about recognising that we are not in this alone, and that if we were we would never make it. It is about recognising that, *if* we are going to live by the values by which Jesus calls us to live, we are going to be absolutely dependent not only on God but on these saints sitting around us this morning, and not just on them, but on all the saints who have sought faithfully to follow Jesus in various places down through the ages.

If we want to resist the seductive power of the hypnotic but hard-hearted world around us, and want instead to follow Jesus, we must do it in company — the company of those living among us now, and the company of those who have gone on ahead and whose life is in God. We must cherish and draw on their wisdom, their encouragement, their prayers, their memory. We must take the time to hear one another's stories, and to listen together to the stories of those who have gone before us. It is important that you find ways of developing a closeness that will enable you to know and sense what is going on in one another's lives so that you can adequately support, nurture and encourage one another. And above all else, spend time together gathered around this table, the place where most clearly our prayers and praises unite with the prayers and praises of the whole communion of saints across the world and across the ages, and with the whole creation, in honour of the one God who holds us together in one body — the fullness of Christ, who fills all in all. Amen.