

All Saints' Sunday
5th November 2023 (All Saints' A)
Saint Mark's, Penn Yan
The Rev. Columba Salamony

I mean to be one, too.

In the name of the holy and undivided Trinity, one God. *Amen.*

One of my favorite things about being an Episcopalian is that our celebration of All Saints' Day is so expansive. It's one of those places where The Episcopal Church has settled squarely centered between the Roman Catholic tradition of venerating the saints and the varied Protestant traditions of passively acknowledging or completely neglecting the very notion of sainthood.

Our Church doesn't limit the great cloud of witnesses to just those whose sainthood has been decided by the church, for their martyrdom or virginity, or because they've had some arbitrary number of miracles attributed to their intercession... But our Church recognizes the saintliness of everyday people—people whose lives are so remarkable that, by their very living, they model to us what it means to be a saint. Their lives demonstrate to us the road we might follow, in faith and good works, to achieve a holy and Godly life.

In many ways, the Beatitudes, those “blessed” statements found in today's Gospel lesson, mark out a similar way of being honored as saints—one that isn't focused on **doing** things but ways of **being** that ground us in our humanity... things like being poor in spirit and mourning, or those who hunger and thirst for justice, who work for peace, and who show mercy to others... While these aren't prescriptive teachings that say, “Do this thing and you will be blessed,” they instead pattern for us the things that are fundamental to living a life that follows the teachings of Christ. The Beatitudes tell us that, to be blessed by God, we should work for peace, we should mourn for the world around us, and—perhaps the more complicated one—we should be open to being insulted by others... because that's how we know we're doing it right.

Before we get to chapter five, Matthew's gospel tells us that Jesus has been traveling throughout all of Galilee, teaching in synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and sickness among the people. And great crowds followed him, coming from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan in Syria. People from all over the place had heard about the things he's been doing, and they wanted to know more—they desired to be close to him and to understand his teachings... Because **they** were the people who would be called blessed—the mourners and the merciful—people from all across Palestine and Syria had gathered together to learn from this teacher who was healing and blessing people...

But I'm also struck by where this text takes place, because everything we know about the custom of the Jewish people during Jesus' lifetime tells us that everything that Jesus was doing had a place where it *should* be done—the Temple. As a teacher and healer, Jesus should've been in the Temple in Jerusalem, where the deserving people, the powerful people, could find him and hear what he had to say. But is that where we find him? No, he's gone up the side of a mountain. He's out in the wilderness, out where the people who need his healing most would be found. He's not seeking out the people sitting in the marble halls of the Temple complex or the wealthy Romans in the heart

of the city, but the people who, both literally and metaphorically, are out on the margins. And, generally—though not exclusively—those are the people whose stories we find in our litany of saints. They're the people who had to push back against the powers of empire and institutions to remind the Church what its role is in the world—to remind the Church that to be followers of Jesus, we have to be people for whom the Beatitudes apply. They're the people whose stories can inspire within us a new way of being a person who claims to follow Jesus.

The Invocation of the Holy Ones of God that we started the service with is a great lesson in church history. I admitted to someone fairly recently (was it Angela?) that I didn't do as well in church history at seminary as some of my other courses. But there's one thing about church history that actually **does** interest me, and it's the history of our saints. The names found in this Invocation—and there are many—are all saints whose lives modeled the values of the Gospel, those who have affected some positive change for both the Church and the world... even the saints of God that we knew personally and loved.

Most of us recognize some of those names, I'm sure... But I know some saints on that list are unfamiliar. Maybe you don't know who Paul Cuffee, Edith Stein, or Perpetua and Felicity are, but I think you should. I think you should know their stories and learn and understand what made them tick—what drove them to live so passionately for the Gospel that they changed the world. The good thing about a worship bulletin is you can take it home and ponder the service throughout the week—and yet every week, I put a big stack of them in the recycling... No, really, take them home! Read them again! Especially this week—take that bulletin home, google some of those names, and learn about who sits at our banquet table of saints!

But more seriously... How can we mean to become one of those saints of God if we don't know their stories? If we don't know how they lived, how can we shape our lives to look like theirs? It's important for us to learn what it was about George Fox's aversion to steeple-houses that drew him to patterning his life how he did, or what about Fanny Crosby's life that led her to write thousands and thousands of hymns, some of which appear in our own hymnbooks.

Our unique Episcopalian ideas around sainthood mean that each of us, because of how we advance God's kingdom on earth, is a saint, and there's no reason why we shouldn't live our lives like that each and every day... to go through the world thinking to ourselves, "for the saints of God are just folk like me, and I mean to be one, too."

Amen.