

THE CHURCH'S HALL OF FAME

Revelation 7. 9-17

1 John 3. 1-3

Matthew 5. 1-12

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

As the great theologian St Irenaeus once said, the glory of God is man fully alive. That is what the saints are. They are men, women and children who are fully alive – created by God, redeemed by Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and living their lives as God intends them to do so, to the fullest.

The Church has a Hall of Fame for its saints. These are the ‘capital S’ Saints of universal recognition. This recognition begins in Scripture. The Epistle to the Hebrews has, for example, an inspiring list of heroes of faith from the Old Testament, and it refers to them as a ‘great cloud of witnesses’ who surround us in order to encourage us by their examples, to assist us through their prayers, and to strengthen us by their fellowship in the Spirit.

Yet we can move on to the heroes of the New Testament, to heroes such as St John the Baptist, St Stephen, St Peter, Saints James and John, St Thomas, Saints Paul and Barnabas; to St Mary Magdalene, Saints Mary and Martha of Bethany, and above all to the Mother of Christ herself, our Lady.

But these inspiring examples of holiness do not end with the completion of the New Testament. There are saints in the Church’s Hall of Fame from every generation, saints who illustrate the victory of Christ in every sort of life. There are monarchs, bishops and priests; nuns and monks; husbands and wives, and mothers and fathers; children whose lives were brief and brilliant; servants of the sick and poor; fighters for justice; martyrs for the Name of Jesus; and members of every race and nation,

coming from every station in life. All of them show us that sanctity (or holiness) is something that occurs everywhere, and that there is glory in the ordinary circumstances of everyday life.

When we examine the biographies of saints, we discover two things. Firstly, we find that they were very human. They also had the weaknesses and frailties that we all know so well; and they were up against the same limitations of nature and nurture that we face ourselves. Secondly, we see the ways in which the grace and power of God entered the lives of those saints; and it was usually at the most critical times, when they were most acutely aware of their weaknesses and frailties. It is in these moments of trial that the saints relied upon (or actually *clung to*) the Lord for refuge and strength. These are the capital 'S' Saints of the Church's Hall of Fame.

But as we celebrate the Feast of All Saints, we do not simply commemorate the capital 'S' saints who are remembered year by year in the Church's calendar. There are also many, many more saints who are unknown to us and who have no official memorial, but who are held close to the heart of God. It is the whole company of heaven that we thank God for today; and we ask for their prayers, that they may be an inspiration to us as we seek in our own way to follow the path that Christ has set us.

For we may not have realised it, but the New Testament applies the word 'saint' to all of us. Saint Paul, when he wrote his epistles to the various churches in the first century, called all of their members 'the saints'. There were, for example, 'the saints' in Corinth and Rome; there were 'the saints' in Philippi and in Ephesus; and there were 'the saints' in Colossae and Thessalonica. Some of these cities were rich, powerful, proud, worldly, political and corrupting places; and they were full of people like us. And yet St Paul called them 'the saints'.

When we are baptised, the following words are pronounced immediately after water is poured upon our forehead: ‘May God, who has received you by baptism into his Church, pour upon you the riches of his grace, that within the company of Christ’s pilgrim people, you may daily be renewed by his anointing Spirit, and come to the inheritance of the *saints* in glory.’ At our baptism, we are regenerated; we are reborn; we enter the Church; and following our baptism, we are to pursue and explore our new identity as *saints*.

To be a saint is not something strange or foreign. On the contrary, to be a saint is to be the very person God made us to be; to use the gifts that God gave us to their full extent; to walk in peace and communion with God; to know the full freedom and strength of what it means to be a fully human being made in the image of God. To be a saint, even though we have fallen very far short of the glory of God in our sin, is to lay hold of the salvation, the redemption and new lease on life that God has purchased for us through Jesus Christ; to lay claim to our adoption as children of God, as members of Christ, and as inheritors of the kingdom of heaven. To be a saint, even as we are keenly aware of our weaknesses and frailties, is to walk by the Spirit, to open ourselves to his strength and holiness like a sail catching the wind; to know that the more yielded and surrendered we are to God’s will, the more we will enjoy his power. This is the paradox of holiness that every saint knows, the paradox which Jesus spells out in every Beatitude that was read in today’s Gospel passage.

On this Feast of All Saints, it is good for us to be inspired by the examples of the heroes of the faith; to rejoice in their fellowship; and be aided by their patronage and prayers. As we do so, let us take courage. Let us run with patience the race that is set before us,¹ so that, together with them we may receive the crown of glory that never fades away.

¹ Cf. Heb 12. 1-2.

This is, of course, the vision that was seen by St John in our passage from Revelation. He sees a multitude so great that it cannot be numbered, from every tribe, people and language. This is, dear friends, the assembly of *all the saints*, to which you and I are called. The great capital 'S' saints, past, present and future are there. So are the saints who have no memorial, but who loved the Lord and tried to do his will. In the end, all those who sought after God and were open to his grace will be brought to perfection through Christ, the Lamb, who is the shepherd of them all. There will be no more tears, but joy unspeakable. The things which we have seen through a glass darkly will be bright and clear. Faith and hope will give way to sight and fulfilment. Surrounded by love, we will be completely at home, because God, who is Love, will be all in all.

Amen.