

THE FEAST OF ALL SAINTS

Isaiah 25. 6-9

Revelation 21. 1-6a

John 11. 32-44

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

Today on this Feast of All Saints, we remember those people, both named and unnamed who have, as our Salvation Army brothers and sisters so beautifully put it – ‘Gone to glory’.

As I survey the long line of the saints who have been formally named in the Church's calendar, I find the diversity and variety of these men and women to be breath-taking; we encounter people of all sorts and types, who lived under very different conditions; and who are an encouraging source of hope for us: all we who feebly struggle whilst they shine in glory.

Once a child was asked, ‘What is a saint?’ and she replied, ‘Someone who lets light in’. She was probably thinking of a stained-glass window; but in a sense, she was absolutely right. Saints are like bright lights in a dark world. Through them, the light of the Gospel and the glory of the presence of God are revealed.

As we look at the lives of the saints, we get glimpses of how life ought to be. The saints challenge us in our way of living: they invite us to risk and adventure. The saints challenge our way of looking at the world, our attitude to life and our priorities. Through them, we get a glimpse of how we can live fully and serve God. The saints are not people who lived diminished lives; rather, they are people who show us the glorious freedom of the children of God. The saints are people who lived their lives

to the fullest, to the glory of God. They challenge us to do the same: to live fully for God *now*; and to reveal his glory *now*.

If any of us are tempted to feel discouraged when we compare our lives to these glorious saints who lived their lives for the glory of God, we would do well to remind ourselves that God chose people to be saints who were far from perfect. St Francis was called from being a carefree partygoer to show us how we can enjoy living for God. St Augustine of Hippo was called from living a passionate life with a mistress and a son born outside of marriage to show us how we can use our passion for God. The saints all had a great appetite for living life to the fullest; and they also came to know and realise their need of God.

For the saints of the Church, and for Christians in every age, this is the heart of the matter. We ‘modern saints’ are called first to recognise our deep need of God. As we do this, we will help the world around us to recover a true vision of what the Church is. The Church is, amongst other things, a group of people who recognise their brokenness and sinfulness and their utter need of God; and who at the same time rejoice in the abundant mercy and grace of the God who in Christ has come among us and alongside us.

The Church is also a group of people who know that God has accepted us, just as we are; and who know that his Holy Spirit is already at work in us and through us. In spite of their feebleness, frailty and sinfulness, Christians (and that includes you and me) are constantly in the process of being transformed so that they can reveal the glory of God.

Yes, today is the Feast of *All* Saints, and not just *Some* Saints! That means that today, we celebrate not only the great saints of the Church who lived their lives to the fullest, to the glory of God; we also celebrate those saints, past and present, whom we know

to be flawed people, whom God still uses to do divine things. We celebrate all those saints upon whom God has acted in baptism, sealing them (as St Paul's letter to the Ephesians says) with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit.¹ We celebrate all those saintly people who, through ordinary acts of love, bring the kingdom of heaven closer to earth. On this Feast of All Saints, we joyfully proclaim that all Christians are surrounded by what the Scriptures call 'a great cloud of witnesses';² who with us form the Communion of Saints.³

It's quite a thing, really. To think that in the Communion of Saints, we are connected to so many others; that we are connected to so much faith; that we are connected to so many stories; that we are connected to so much divine love. And what's more, that this is still true in this day and age of alienation, when people are so desperate to 'belong' and to find community.

When Pope John Paul II came to England in 1982, it was the first-ever visit to that country by a reigning Pope. The visit was a pastoral one, unlike the state visit of Pope Benedict in 2010; and during Pope John Paul's tour, he visited nine cities and delivered no fewer than 16 major addresses. When the Pope preached, huge crowds came to hear him, including 350,000 people who turned up for an open-air Mass at Manchester airport. The sea of faces stretched about as far as the eye could see.

It stretches the mind to imagine the 'Communion of Saints' as it truly is, in spiritual terms. And yet, you and I are indeed among them in spirit today, and one day we shall be there with them in reality. Each one of us who is commissioned to share and live the gospel, is helping to swell that great throng of saints even further. Each one of us, in spite of our flaws and our weaknesses, has the possibility of making a

¹ Cf. Eph 1. 13-14.

² Cf. Heb 12. 1.

³ Cf. Eph 2. 19.

big difference in the lives of people around us as we allow ourselves to be transformed by God and used to accomplish his purposes.

At the end of the Eucharist that is about to be celebrated, you and I will be invited to go out, to go forth, and to love and serve the Lord; to go with confidence and joy in the name of the risen and living Lord Jesus Christ; and to live his risen life, surrounded as we are by so great a cloud of witnesses. We will be invited to be instruments of the Lord's love in bringing others to faith, and to a knowledge and love of the Saviour. How surprising to think that our God really wants to use us, ordinary folk, to do his work; but the truth is that we are his saints on earth who have been given a divine mission. And he will equip us and enable us to get the job done!

Amen.