

Sermon based on 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

Theme: “We’re all saints, with God’s help”

for All Saints’ Day, Cottenham with Rampton,

1 November 2020, Alison Wedgbury

In the church calendar, today is All Saints’ Day and both our churches are called ‘All Saints’. That wasn’t always the case. In the 11th century the church in Rampton was linked with St Giles Church in Cambridge. In Cottenham it seems the church was originally named for St Peter and St Paul. Sometimes English churches changed their name when they merged with other churches - a sort of compromise, a way of being fair to lots of different historical saints. Sometimes English churches became ‘All Saints’ to get away from being seen as Roman Catholic. In the Church of England, St Mary still tops the list at 2,368 churches, though All Saints comes a close second at 1,467 churches. So does ‘All Saints’ mean some buildings and hundreds of historical figures? Or are we ‘all saints’ today, people trying to be good Christians together in Cottenham and Rampton?

Words matter. Search the Bible in English for the word ‘saints’ and you get a very mixed picture. It depends on which version you choose. The King James Bible mentions ‘saints’ 36 times in the Old Testament and 62 times in the New Testament. The version of the Bible we have available in Cottenham church, the New International Version (NIV), deliberately does not use the words ‘saint’ or ‘saints’ at all. It refers to ‘holy people’ or ‘God’s people’.

Then when we get to *The Message* version. There the word ‘saint’ in the New Testament becomes less like a compliment and more like a warning about how NOT to behave. It becomes almost a negative. [Matthew 23:28](#)

“You’re hopeless, you religion scholars and Pharisees! Frauds!...

*People look at you and think you’re **saints**, but beneath the skin you’re total frauds.*

That points us to dangerous ground. We tend to make new people saints and heroes and then we also tend to look for the bad. We destroy the reputation or statues of people who used to be our saints and heroes. We don’t quite know what to do with the knowledge that people can be both good and bad at times.

You could say that this year, everyone working in the NHS, bus drivers, supermarket staff and many other key workers have become 2020 ‘saints’. Perhaps we took them for granted last year but this year we have put them on a pedestal and called them heroes for what they are doing, for looking after others. Most people would agree those people have done, and are still doing, an amazing job for the rest of us. Also some celebrities come to mind. Gary Lineker gave £140,000 to the British Red Cross

towards research into the Corona virus. He has also invited refugees to live in his Surrey mansion. Nicola Adams on *Strictly Come Dancing* has broken new ground by dancing in a same sex couple. But one of the biggest stories this year about a footballer is that of Marcus Rashford. He has shaken up the Government on free meals for children in poverty. In one school the children have named one of their classrooms after him. They said:

“Marcus is determined, polite, thoughtful, does not boast or show off, which is why we admire him so much. He does not give up. He loves his mum and knows he wouldn’t be where he is today without her”.

On the other hand, we have been in danger of ignoring some other workers who make our lives better. Perhaps that includes Amazon delivery staff, keeping to tight schedules, driving on their own across the country. Maybe it includes musicians and actors who now have no income. We’ve been fairly quiet about care home assistants. Perhaps we’ve been let off the hook from demanding properly funded social care, properly priced goods and properly funded arts and culture.

We’ve also knocked quite a lot of other people off pedestals in the last year. I’m not just talking about the statues in Bristol and other cities that have come down. In the Church of England both our Archbishops this year, Justin and Stephen, have been heroes one moment and not heroes the next. Both this year have been celebrated for inspiring our faith and speaking out on social justice in the pandemic. Both are also being criticised for insufficient attention to sexual and spiritual abuse in the church over the years. I sincerely hope and pray that young Marcus Rashford does not get damaged by people finding fault with him. He’s a human being like anyone else and probably is not completely saintly every minute of the day.

That’s where today’s Bible reading from Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians comes in. It helps us with ideas of what being a saint might mean today. It’s only a few verses but is packed full of theology about the kingdom of God. It’s also rich in meaning, practical advice and guidance on care for others. Admittedly, Paul is always a complex character! In verse 10, he seems to be calling himself perfect.

‘You are witnesses, and God also, how holy, righteous, and blameless we were among you who believed’.

He seeks affirmation from human beings in Thessalonica and from God too! He asks God to recognise how holy, true to God, he has been in all his relationships. He asks the Thessalonians to recognise how upright and blameless he has been. He has made himself vulnerable, giving of himself, working night and day, not being a financial burden on other people. His focus is on sharing God’s word, not merely human words. He celebrates the fact that he sees God’s word *‘at work in you*

believers'. In last week's Bible reading Paul used the image of a 'mother' or 'nurse' figure to represent strength through gentleness. In today's reading Paul adds the 'father' figure, who instructs, encourages and guides people to *'lead lives worthy of God who calls you into his own kingdom and glory'*. Today we may or may not split the roles of mother and father in that particular way. We often recognise that both sets of qualities and skills are valuable, whichever gender of person is activating them. It is clear that we need both gentleness and strength, knowledge, encouragement and guidance from others, in order to become confident believers. That often involves mentoring.

No famous footballer, dancer, medic or church leader ever got to the top without mentoring from others. Also we can all think of people here in Cottenham and Rampton who have lived a life of supporting others, but have never been in the public eye. They too would probably say they were encouraged by others before them. Here's *The Message* version of the Bible again, this time about an Old Testament figure:

Romans 4:17-18

'We call Abraham "father" not because he got God's attention by living like a saint, but because God made something out of Abraham when he was a nobody'.

'Saints' and 'heroes' were all 'a nobody' once. Obviously one of Marcus Rashford's key supporters was his mother. As the school children said: *"He loves his mum and knows he wouldn't be where he is today without her"*.

So if we are really going to be 'all saints' together, who can we support, encourage and guide as others did for us in the past? One definition of a mentor is someone who turns back and offers a hand to those behind, noticing the vulnerable. Likewise we are all in need of being mentored ourselves. We need to lean forward and seek the hand of others in the church. Just like the Thessalonians.

So let us work like Paul did. Let us be serious about mentoring those lurking on the edge of faith, the young, the old, those suffering ill health, those who are regular churchgoers and even our church leaders. We all share both vulnerability and strength in our own special ways. We can all be saints in some way.