

All Saints Sunday 2018

Sunday 4 November

Hands up those of you who would consider yourself to be a holy person? Somehow I thought I'd get that kind of reaction, not just because of our English reticence, but also because of your obvious humility! I imagine even fewer of you would have put your hands up if I had asked the question; 'How many of you would consider yourselves to be saints'? And here we have a problem, here the church has a problem, because if we the Christians don't recognise in ourselves holiness let alone saintliness, what hope do those who do not know the Lord Jesus have?

Last Sunday I was not on duty and so was given a list of jobs to do. I found myself in a new world. I went to Over Farm to get some food and found the place heaving with children going pumpkin picking. They were happy, and their parents were happy. Not sure about the pumpkins. Then I had to go on from there to the Quays to buy a birthday present. Again, whilst this congregation were at this service, the shops were packed, again with families, and they seemed happy. I reflected on the difference between that Sunday experience and our usual Sunday experience, and indeed the comparative numbers involved. And then, before I depressed myself about usual Sunday attendance in the Church of England, I felt proud of the saints and holy ones who worship week by week, day by day, praying for the communities in which we are set. Faithfulness is a virtue and it is that which makes you the holy ones of God. Don't underestimate yourselves, this is our vocation, to be holy, for if the Christians can't be that, then where is our hope? Being holier than thou is the opposite of this faithfulness, so never let us fall into that trap. On this All Saints Sunday, we are to listen to God's word and to receive him in bread and wine and to go from here in the knowledge that we have been commissioned to be holy people, holy by Jesus working through us rather than through any worthiness of our own.

On Friday I was with a number of other clergy, sitting at the feet of the Dean of Divinity from Duke University in the United States. He was able to summarise for us a checklist of how the

church should focus its mission at a time when society is in such incredible need of the Good News of Jesus. Here is his message.

If the church is going to be effective we must always begin with the end – and the end we mean is God himself, the end of sin and the reign of the Kingdom of God. This is the new heaven and the new earth described in our first reading. Unless we have our eyes focused upon our beginning and our ending which is God in Christ then our activity is no better than shopping and pumpkin picking. Our vision has to be the grander vision of glory in our first reading; ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things will pass away.’ Our beginning is also our end, in the glory of God in our midst.

The next task we have as Christians is to bear witness. You holy ones are doing that today by being here, but bearing witness is a daily activity, confident enough in our own faith to confess that we are Christians and that we believe in the God who believes in us. Too often the church, and by that I mean each one of us individually, are timid in our confession, and never bring up the joy of our faith in conversation. We are much happier to be holy by example than through word - through the Word made flesh. To bear witness is our calling.

Thirdly, we must stay open to the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit is active in our lives then miracles happen, mountains are moved and the dead, like Lazarus in today’s Gospel, are raised. But the Spirit can be held back by our lack of expectation and our apathy. Open to the Spirit, things change and things grow and things live. This is especially true in worship, a sense of expectation that people can be moved by worship. A young boy once asked his father why he had to go to church when clearly the preacher didn’t want to be there either! Expectation in the Spirit breathes the flames of holy fire.

Fourthly, we must be prepared to plant, to try new things, and like every plant, to see if it grows or not, and we must be prepared to prune, to cut back in order to bring on new growth and fruit. Every gardener knows that without planting and pruning the garden becomes a colourless

landscape rather than a garden of delight. Stopping some things, even those things which still seem to be alive, is necessary if our activity and service is to bear fruit, fruit that will last.

Greg Jones encouraged us next to rely more and more on storytelling. The Gospel is prime storytelling, so much so that many of us can recite the parables and healing miracles, they stick to the soul. Our society today uses lots of words, instant words, 140 characters in a Tweet and it has lost the gift of storytelling, and yet we own the greatest story ever told - so we must be confident in telling the good news, especially when we bear witness.

And then we must not be shy of using humour in our storytelling, and be people who look like we know that we are saved - and are reasonably happy about it. Last week I was asked to bless the new bus station, and I was uncertain how it would go down. What words would I say? I asked the kids at the Deanery meal table what I should say to break the ice and not seem trite or churchy. One of my children who shall remain nameless apart from the fact that it was Sam (point to Sam in the choir), said; 'It's a bus station Dad, so turn up late and bring three other Deans with you at the same time! Everybody laughed, and then I said Let us pray, and 150 unchurched dignitaries bowed their heads in prayer, and we prayed a blessing on the buses. We live this side of the resurrection not the other side of the cross, and we can and should be happy about it.

Lastly, we were reminded to be dealers in hope, this is another thing that makes you holy. If we cannot offer society hope, then we are hope-less. Once, there was a parish who were grumpy about being sent a woman priest. There was much grumbling. One day the Churchwardens decided to take the new female vicar fishing, to try and break the ice. When they reached the middle of the lake, they all realised that they had left the fishing tackle on the shore. The female priest got out of the boat, and walked on the water, and fetched the tackle. One churchwarden leaned over to the other and said, 'Not only have they sent us a woman but they've sent us one that can't swim!' Hope should be our business, and should be written all over our faces.

Beginning with our end of God, bearing witness, being open to the Spirit, enjoying storytelling, planting and pruning, laughing in joy and being grounded in hope, these are the qualities of the

holy ones of God. These things I know you believe in, so we must be confident in our sharing of them, for then the Kingdom will grow.

I asked you a question earlier, and a few put their hands up rather sheepishly. But how many of you want to be the kind of Christian and in the kind of Church I have described, put your hands up now please. Please keep your hand raised as I read from today's Gospel; 'Jesus said to them, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone and the dead man came out and Jesus said, 'Unbind him, and let him go. Jesus, Lord, unbind me, and let me go.' Amen.

Stephen Lake, Dean of Gloucester