

Rev. 7:9-17; Hebrews 11:32 - 12:2; Luke 7:36-48

Yesterday was November 1st. That is traditionally celebrated as All Saints Day. It was also Reiner's birthday. You probably think that there is no connection between those two events, but you might actually be wrong about that as we'll see later.

I like the season of All Saints because we are not celebrating the powerful & the brilliant, but the good. We are celebrating the people through whose lives the light of God seemed to shine especially brightly, and the darker the world around them the more brightly they seemed to shine, & so they gave courage & hope & inspiration to those around them.

I like the season of All Saints because we are reminded of the Communion of Saints. Whenever we say the Apostles' Creed we say we believe in the Communion of Saints, but we don't think about it very often, at least not in our Western Protestant churches. Though I think there is a much more lively sense of the communion of saints in Africa, that those who have died are not lost to us. The lovely thought is that if those who have died are with God, & God is with us, then God in whom we live & move & have our being, holds us together. This is nothing to do with spiritualism, or about trying to make contact with those who have died. We are not into that, it is simply remembering that God's people are one in heaven & on earth. In forgetting that we deprive ourselves of so much comfort & encouragement.

I like the season of All Saints because it includes the feast of All Souls - today, November 2nd. is All Souls day. That is those who made it into the great calendar of the saints, and those of who did not but who are yet part of the holy people of God every bit as much as the most good & holy people. That's where Reiner comes in, & all the rest of us too, who stumble & fumble along the way of faith & goodness: sometimes getting it gloriously right & sometimes horribly wrong: faithful & brave one minute, doubting & trembling the next; wise today, foolish tomorrow. Yet somehow by the grace of God in the very depths of our being wanting to get it right, wanting to be channels of God's love in our needy world, wanting to be there with God & for God in our living & worshipping.

Let me describe a church of such people. This is a real church & not an imaginary one. There are some lovely delightful people in it, but it has a bit of a reputation. It's a bit cliquy, you know little groups of people who think that they are a bit special, that they are really the heart of the church. It is also a bit snobby - if you're well-off & speak nicely you're made very welcome, but if you're working class & haven't much money then you feel you don't fit in. Then there are people falling out with each other. It has got to such a pitch that 2 of them are seriously

considering taking each other to court. It has also been whispered that the private lives of a few of them wouldn't bear too close an examination.

So where is this church ? It was in Corinth, & you can read all about the scandals in Paul's letters. I might add than in over 40 years of ministry I have sadly come across all of those things within the life of the church, but happily not all in the same church - as lest not yet. But how does Paul address that mixed bag of people, & how would he address you mixed bag of people ? In the NRSV which is closest to the Greek Paul wrote, he opens his 1st letter to them: *To the Church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in XT Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of the Lord Jesus XT.*

Called to be saints, literally "holy ones set aside as God's people to be used for his good purposes". Sainthood does not begin with anything we do, but with what God does, his call to us to be saints. We may not be called upon to embark on some great work of service like Mother Teresa; or to face bitter opposition in a great cause of justice like Martin Luther King or Nelson Mandela, or to launch a movement of revival & renewal like John Wesley or William Booth of the Salvation Army (though never rule out any of those things!). But we are all called to be saints in one way or another, all called to add to the sum total of goodness in the world, to light a small candle of hope or encouragement for someone going through a hard time, & so to reflect the light of God in a dark place - & you do that wonderfully well here at Peacechurch though you don't think of yourselves as saints in any special way.

We sometimes think that our little lives won't make much difference to the great scheme of things, but being part of the communion of saints is like being part of a great symphony orchestra. Some may have leading parts that stand out at various times, but every player has their part to play, & their playing enhances the whole & contributes to the purpose of the orchestra in creating something beautiful & inspiring.

TS Eliot wrote "Murder in the Cathedral", a play about the death of Thomas a Becket, one of the lead players in the orchestra, who was killed as a martyr in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170. In the play there is a place not just for the brave & holy saint, but also for the ordinary people of the city, the peasants & servants of Canterbury. In the play they share in a chorus & this is part of it:

We praise thee O God for thy glory displayed in all the creatures of the earth...both the hunters & the hunted....Therefore man, whom thou hast made to be conscious of thee, must consciously praise thee in thought & in word & in deed. Even with the hand to the broom, the back bent in laying the fire. the knee bent in cleaning the hearth, we, the scrubbers & sweepers of Canterbury...praise thee.

We thank thee for thy mercies of blood, for thy redemption by blood. For the blood of thy martyrs & saints shall enrich the earth, shall create the holy places. For wherever a saint has dwelt, wherever a martyr has given his blood for the blood of Christ, there is holy ground, & the sanctity shall not depart from it.

The woman who anointed Jesus was one of the scrubbers & sweepers of her day, a humble second violinist on the back row of the orchestra, but her simple act, according to John's account, *filled the house with its fragrance*: The fragrance of love & goodness & joy. Such people give hope for the world, That woman was a sinner, like us all, yet her simple act made that house, in that moment, into holy ground.

Let me give you a more modern example from my own experience in Belfast NI during the awful troubles there. A Protestant boy had been killed & a Catholic boy was in prison charged with his murder. Madeleine, a RC lady & part of an ecumenical community, knew the mothers of both boys. She saw the Protestant mother out shopping & invited her home for a cup of tea. The mother said that it was terrible having a son killed but it must be even worse to know that your son had committed murder & that Catholic mother must be suffering too & she would like to meet her. Without making prior arrangements, because that could be put them in great danger if the wrong people found out, Madeleine took the Protestant mother round the Catholic mother's house. When the each mother realised who the other one was they simply embraced & shared their tears, & those tears & that embrace made that threshold into holy ground. Madeleine's courage & love in inviting the Protestant mother into her home, & the coming together of the 2 mothers were lights in a dark place, glimmers of hope. Yet none of the women would ever think of themselves as saints.

Genuine saints, like those women & the woman who anointed Jesus would never think of themselves as perfect, but as forgiven. And that is the heart of it, The heart of being a saint is knowing our sinfulness & our weakness but knowing that we are loved & cherished by God not because of good things we have done, but simply because he loves us as the perfect parent loves their child, simply because they are there. So instead of getting despondent about ourselves when we fall short, we are to get up & get going again. No not perfect, but forgiven.

In our worship, & especially at every service of Holy Communion as we gather at the Lord's Table, we link ourselves with all the saints who have gone before us & all the saints of God's Church today. By God's grace let us try, like them, to light candles of hope & encouragement for people, to add to the total sum of goodness in the world, to make the streets & homes where we live into holy ground.

I like the season of all saints because we celebrate not the powerful, but the good; not the perfect but the forgiven; not human achievement but God's gracious call to be saints, to be his people in the world: & that means us. Thanks be to God.