

Homily – 01-11-20 – All Saints Day - Bishop Cam Venables

Readings: Revelation 7:9-17 Psalm 34:1-10, 22; Ephesians 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

In September 2016 Pope Francis formally recognised Mother Teresa of Kolkata as a Saint. I don't think anybody will dispute that Mother Teresa was a person of great faith, who felt called to work with those who were most marginalised in Indian society, and who blessed the lives of many. In 1979 she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, and the religious order she founded continues to serve the least, the lost, and the lonely in a number of countries.

While preparing for today's remembrance of All Saints' I've found myself wondering what it is that makes a 'saint'? Technically the Catholic Church will not start the review process for considering someone until they've been dead for at least five years, and then there have to be at least two documented miracles in order for them to be considered possible candidates!

While growing up I thought that saints were like Christian superheroes who have, against significant odds, done heroic things. Women and men who have been inspired and sustained by God's Spirit, to bring light and hope to the particular context in which they lived. Earlier this year I read a book about two inspiring Christian leaders who challenged the evils of National Socialism in Nazi Germany. The Catholic Priest, Fr Maximilian Kolbe, who was deliberately starved to death in Auschwitz, and the Lutheran, Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was hung in Flossenber.

Drawing deeply from their faith each of these men offered extraordinary grace to their fellow prisoners, and those who held them captive. Maximilian Kolbe was Canonised by the Catholic Church in 1982, and so is remembered as Saint Maximilian Kolbe... while Dietrich Bonhoeffer simply remains, Dietrich Bonhoeffer! So, why one, and not the other? Perhaps if a person is to be recognised as a saint by the Catholic Church they need not only to have been dead for some years, and had some miracles attributed to them... they also need to have been a Roman Catholic?

In the New Testament Paul clearly understood 'saints' in a different way. He wrote 'to the saints' in Ephesus, Philippi, and Corinth, and sent greetings 'from the saints' he was living with when he wrote his second letter to the Corinthian church. For Paul 'saints' were living people who followed Christ. People whose lives were hopefully characterised by their love of God, their faith in Christ, and their compassionate response to those who had need.

The reading from Matthew's Gospel today remembers Jesus teaching the disciples and the crowd on a mountain. Immediately for the first listeners there would have been a sense of expectation because mountains were understood to be places of encounter between God and people. For the Jewish and Christian community there is written memory of Moses going up a mountain to receive sacred law that would shape the way people lived. Jesus went up a mountain to teach what is often called the sermon on the mount, and in this I think he talks about the saints: those who are blessed by God.

However, Jesus did not use the traditional Law based approach of direction to do, or not do things. He did not say blessed are those who do not take the Lord's name in vain, or steal. Instead he startlingly began, 'Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven...' This is not the superhero approach to being a saint that I imagined in my childhood in which people would be almost invincible in Spirit and only and only occasionally pulled down by some form of kryptonite.

'Blessed are the poor in Spirit...' Jesus said: and in this imagine humility, gentleness, and patience, 'for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven'.

I think the recurring theme of 'Kingdom' in Matthew's Gospel is always a challenge. Not a kingdom with an army to impose law and order and expand territory... but a Kingdom in which people are humble, gentle, kind, and patient. What do you and I imagine when we say in the Lord's prayer, 'Your kingdom come, your will be done...?' Is it humility, gentleness, kindness, and patience?

This is only the first of nine affirmations and it's worth taking time to sit with them and reflect on what they might mean. 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted' is an affirmation that clearly offers hope to people who are grieving the loss of loved ones, but is there more to mourn than this? Do we also grieve and mourn injustice and unrealised potential, and if so will we be comforted in this life or the next?

'Blessed are the meek...' Jesus counterculturally affirmed to a world that often thinks that might is right, and that winning is everything. 'Blessed are the meek...' Jesus affirmed, '...for they will inherit the earth.' Really? For those who have been dispossessed by force from the land of their birth, 'Blessed are the meek...' - What could they possibly inherit?

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...' suggests that part of being a saint - a follower of Christ - is to yearn for greater truth and justice in the world, and more than that work collaboratively with others to try and make this reality. Perhaps in that working together to care for those who slip through the gaps of care in our society's safety net - we find fulfilment and are filled? Perhaps we have some understanding about this one even when it has the potential to take us to uncomfortable places and demand so much of us?

'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy...' clearly aligns with that part of the Lord's prayer which says, 'Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.' Clearly aligns with the incredibly challenging direction from Jesus to forgive our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Clearly aligns even with the whispered prayer in Gethsemane, 'Not my will... but yours.'

'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God...' is such a rich affirmation, and it reminded me of a phrase I read recently in a novel. The author describes a character wrestling with a decision and he was clearly being pulled in two directions which each had consequences and trying to pursue both was proving internally destructive. Eventually the character is forced by a crisis to choose and after choosing the writer suggests that they went forward with an undivided heart. I just love that phrase 'an undivided heart' and sometimes I yearn for that clarity in my life of faith, and sometimes I have it for a season and then it goes.

I think when we have a pure and undivided heart we see God everywhere! I don't think the affirmation is limited to thinking about seeing God at the end of our earthly life I think the affirmation suggests that we will see God's presence each day and everywhere.

'Blessed are the peacemakers...' and dear Lord how much does the world need people who work collaboratively with others to make peace possible. The brutal murder of three people in a French Catholic Church in recent days has reminded us of this; the ongoing violence between Israelis and Palestinians remind us of this; the growing number of people killed by shooting in the US reminds us

of this; and the horrific rate of violence against women in our own country reminds us of this.

We need skilled and committed people to cast a compelling vision that suggests peace is not only possible and that peace is a better way to one country to relate with another, and for harmony within countries; for relationships between people and in particular between family members. 'Blessed are the peacemakers...' Jesus said, 'for they will be called children of God.'

Isn't that an identity we like to claim - that we are each beloved children of God? And we might theologially base that claim in the understanding found in the first of the creation stories that we are each made in Gods image, but can also we be peace makers? I think there is often a latent potential within each of us to be peace makers which may be realised through letter writing, emails and meetings... but, it can also mean challenging violent language when we hear it. Language that diminishes another person... and I say this not only because words hurt, but because unchallenged words lead to actions that diminish the lives of others.

As children of God - as saints - how do we use our words when we talk and write about others, and when we speak and write to them? Are we life-giving peace makers, or do our words diminish and divide? This is the particular beatitude I want to think about in the coming week, and I invite you join me in seeking greater clarity about the responsibilities that seem to come with being a child of God: in particular the responsibility of being peace makers.

On this Feast of All Saints' we can look back through the centuries and remember faithful people who have recognised that the values of God's Kingdom are not the same as economic and political systems that oppress or deny life. We can give thanks for Mother Theresa, Maximilian Kolbe, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and all who have challenged evil and injustice, and have kept the faith.

We can also give thanks for those have challenged us by their example to be more faithful in our living? Godly people who have inspired, guided, and loved us... even when we made this difficult! I think these are also among the saints we give thanks for today.

But there's a responsibility that comes from this rich inheritance - if you like the baton has been passed on from them to us! We are called not only to be blessed by God, but also be guided by God to bless others. There are people in our lives - these God given lives - who look to us to be loved, and who long for us to be counter-cultural, Spirit led, life-giving, peace-making... saints!

In the coming days of this week may God's Kingdom come, and God's will be done, in your life and mine. Amen