

Year C All Saints Day

Who are our Saints?

Tuesday, 1st November, is All Saints Day, also known as All Hallows Day, and The Feast of All the Saints. It is a feast day in our church Calendar, and as such we are asked to observe it on the Sunday closest to 1st November.

For church Calendar geeks, we have six categories of Holy Days. Holy Days in categories one to four should be kept by the church. All Saints Day is in the second category; the first and highest category is for days relating directly to Jesus, including Sundays in Advent, Lent, and Holy Week.

Some people get a bit twitchy when I mention saints. They are nervous we may be getting far too Roman Catholic and at any moment we will be praying for the saints to intercede for us. I respect that for many people praying through the saints is the most natural thing to do, whilst for others it is the opposite. What I hope we can agree on is that there can be a strong spiritual bond between those who are in heaven – what is often termed the 'church triumphant' – and the living, the 'church militant'. I know I have often felt very spiritually close to those who have died.

So, who are these saints that we are asked to celebrate in our service today? Well, it isn't just those people who have been canonised, and have an official title of 'saint', conferred on them through some process of testing and quality assurance. In fact, although there are many 'official saints' that I admire and see as providing a model of how to live a Christian life, they are not the only ones who really come to my mind when I think of the saints, and we are all urged to consider a much wider group of people than those 'official saints'.

On all Saints Day we are encouraged to reflect on other people who we know to have been holy, to have done their best to follow Christ's example, and to have left the world a better place by their presence. And whose life and example probably still ripples through lives in a beneficial way, directly or indirectly.

I wonder who has been an influence on your life, that helped lead you to faith, helped you on your faith journey, and encouraged you to become a follower of our Lord and saviour, Jesus Christ?

I wonder whose influence made a positive impact on you, and through that impact, there will be an everlasting and eternal change for the better in our world, as it effects continue to ripple through generations?

There have been several people in my life who helped me on my faith journey, mainly ordinary everyday folk who might be truly astonished to be told they were a saint. And then there are a very few 'famous' people whose lives have been an inspiration and a challenge to me on my faith journey. You may not be surprised to know that Eric Liddell is one of those. Reading the various biographies of his life and talking with an old man who as a teenager had played Finlandia in the internment camp band for Eric as he lay dying, has given me a model of Christian life to try and emulate and continually learn from.

My mum used to talk fondly of her paternal grandmother, who, every Sunday during the school holidays, took her to St Peter's church in Broadstairs, and would encourage my mum in her own faith development. So, even though I never knew my great grandmother, Emma Knott, she is one of those saints for me, for without her role in my mother's faith, I may not have come to have my own faith today, nurtured by my own mother. Emma Knott's impact has rippled through four generations.

So, today, I invite you to reflect on the saints. Saints whose names are writ large in our Bible stories, saints who are the great fathers and mothers of our faith whose writings have nourished and guided us, writers of texts and writers of hymns perhaps. And then, let us reflect on, and give thanks for the everyday saints; those who have personally led and guided us to faith in Jesus, the Christ.

I invite you now in a minute of silence, to reflect on your own faith journey and who those saints were that guided and led you. To reflect and give thanks for their qualities and their guidance.

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For the generations following on from us, how do we think they gain knowledge of the 'famous saints' and how will they come into contact with the everyday saints? That is a challenge for us all. How do we reach out and show our love and concern for the generations of our children and grandchildren? How do we enable them to encounter our generous and loving God, through scripture, through writings and hymns, in an age when there is access to so much media and material that seems to have so little to do with living a life of faith?

It seems to me that personal relationships, based on Christ's love, on Christian love, *agape* in Greek, is key. Our gospel reading shows us that we are to use our personal resolve to consciously choose a way of thinking and being that enables us to do good, to live by the Christian values we aspire to. The sermon on the plain describes so well what is expected of one who is already living in God's kingdom. It is a sermon by Jesus to his own disciples, addressing the benefits they have in their rich lives because the kingdom of God belongs to them.

It is not for us to seek a saintly title; but it is for us to desire with all our hearts to show God's love to all we encounter, and to desire to guide and support all on their journey in faith. As Paul says in the reading from Ephesians, we, who have put our hope in Christ, may work for His glory, having been marked with the seal, the promised Holy Spirit.

On this All Saints Day, let us give thanks and remember all those who have brought us to faith and guided us on our faith journey, and pray that we too may guide others on their journey.

Nick Bowry