

All Souls Day 5th November 2023

Today we are marking All Souls Day, the day when we commemorate those who have died, but actually today is also when many churches mark All Saints Day, the day when we remember both the living and dead saints. – and so I want to look briefly at both.

Honouring and remembering the dead is a way of grieving and processing loss. It's also part of the way in which we confront death with the victory of the cross.

But right now we are living in a world where for many people there is no choice as to how they practice their rituals of remembrance. That is particularly true in Palestine and Israel right now. For most Muslims in Palestine who have lost a family member. After the burial process, which involves washing the body and wrapping it in a burial shroud, men and women mourn for three days in prescribed ways, all of which have had to go out of the window for any family caught up in the conflict.

It's no different for those Israelis who have lost close family members. Many have not even been able to access their loved one's bodies, and even if they have managed to arrange a burial, many can't perform the traditional seven-day grieving ritual, either because they have been called up as reservists or they are fleeing rocket attacks.

So whatever the rights and wrongs of the present round of fighting, one can only feel for the families on both sides who can't turn to their familiar cultural and religious practices to help them come to terms with their loss.

And what is true for Israelis and Palestinians is also true for Ukrainians and Russians and in other parts of the world where fighting is taking place such as Yemen and Myanmar.

To a lesser extent the same was true during COVID, when so many were unable to be by the side of a much-loved parent, grandparent, brother, sister, son or daughter on their final passage from life to death, knowing that their loved one was in effect dying alone.

So it is good to remind ourselves of those we have lost, especially those who have died in the past year. We remember their names, faces, our memories of them, and perhaps realise how much or how little we have come to terms with our loss.

So why do we need both All Saints and All Souls. Well, All Saints is more about remembering the millions of witnesses who have gone before us and who have shown, that even with all their flaws, that living a Christian life actually is possible. Because in the Bible the saints are never the most virtuous, the most faithful Christians. No, according to Paul, all saints are Christians and all Christians are saints. Yes, that is you and me.

We are not just talking about the St Pauls, the St Francis', the Martin Luther Kings, just a few of the obvious saints of the past 2000 years, but we're talking about the likes of you and me, ordinary people, through whom God has chosen to work, and sometimes work miracles. An obvious example for me is my late brother-in-law, who died on All Saints Day a year ago. A parish priest all his working life, he was a real encouragement and example to Markie and to me on our faith journeys.

He is a reminder that just as God's grace was sufficient for him, so God's grace is sufficient for me, especially in those times when faith can seem a bit wobbly.

The Church itself doesn't always make faith easy either. It's been too complicit in too many sins for that. While the focus today is on abusive priests coupled, all too often, with the desire to protect the reputation of the church at the expense of the victim, while its historical rampant antisemitism has contributed in part to the horrors we are currently seeing on our television screens.

But the saints, remind us that not all Church history is like that. There are plenty of faithful Christians down the centuries who have devoted their lives to feeding the hungry, healing the sick, clothing the poor, visiting the prisoners, in other words reflecting Jesus' focus on the marginalised and the oppressed.

So how do we recognise those saints living in our midst today? I'm sure it's no coincidence that the Gospel for All Saints Day is the Beatitudes. We will find saints among the poor in spirit, among those who mourn, among the meek, among those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, among the merciful, among the pure in heart, among the peacemakers, among those who are

persecuted. Anyone who exhibits those qualities will enjoy a real sense of God's blessing.

All but the last beatitude is in the third person, so it comes as quite a shock to hear Blessed are **you** when people revile **you** and persecute **you**. It's similar to when Nathan confronts David about his sinfulness with Uriah and Bathsheba. It suddenly becomes personal, but equally it reminds us that when it happens to us we are in good company with so many of the prophets and of course Jesus himself.

It also reminds us that when we pray for blessings we do well to remember that we may never get any of the blessings we ask for, but we will get the blessings we need at that particular time.

Now some have argued that the Beatitudes aren't practical, too impossible to live up to. Do they just show us how far short we fall from being what we are supposed to be? Are they supposed to make us feel so guilty that we have no option but to turn to Jesus?

If that were true why would Jesus start each sentence with the word blessed, a word that can also be translated as happy. No, Jesus isn't trying to set us off on some sort of guilt trip by using words like blessed and happy to describe a state we can never reach.

So what is Jesus up to in the Beatitudes? For a start, unlike the Ten Commandments, they do not tell us what to do or what not to do. Basically, he assures us that if we follow his example – and Jesus exemplified all eight of the Beatitudes – then we will be blessed.

Perhaps he was also trying to encourage his listeners, and by extension us, to look around and see what is already among us, to realise there are far more saints around us than we perhaps realise. That is not to ignore the call to live that way as best we can, but the point is we can learn from one another through our different giftings. Even if we can't model all eight, that doesn't mean we shouldn't try to model as many we can.

In 2016 Pope Francis described the Beatitudes as the identity card of all Christians, and that they could be applied to the troubles and difficulties of every age. But what about those people who exhibit the qualities described in

the Beatitudes but don't make room for Jesus or God in their lives? It was apparently Erasmus, a Dutch Catholic priest in the 15th and 16th centuries, who said Bidden or not bidden, God is present, and on the face of it they override the need for faith. God is pouring out his blessings, whether or not we acknowledge his presence.

Clearly we miss and mourn those saints who we have lost in the past year, but equally we should celebrate what they showed us and taught us, how they enriched us with their presence.

Faced with all the seemingly intractable problems in the world, the saints of the past are those who, despite their failings and weaknesses, kept believing in hope and resurrection and grace and Jesus and believed it so much they passed it onto us. The saints of today are in the same position. We may feel overwhelmed, but we should remember that our ancestors lived through turmoil, through war, through division and hatred. They didn't solve all the problems of their time and neither will we. But, nevertheless, we are called to keep hope alive

The hope those saints passed on to us is something that many sports fans understand only too well, particularly those fans who turn up week in week out to support their team knowing full well glory isn't coming their way, but nevertheless live in hope that one day things will change.

As one commentator put it, Blessed are those who continue to believe, against all evidence, that their hope is not misplaced, for they will eventually win.

Actually, given how time after time humanity makes a mess of life in so many ways, perhaps it's fair to say that if anyone knows how to root for a team that will break your heart through thick and thin, it's God. But eventually God will win – with a bit of help from his saints.