

## Sermon

Today we gather to celebrate the saints of God; we recall that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, those who have gone before us. A saint, from the Latin word *sanctus* means holy, so a saint is a person who shares in the divine life of Christ. In the New Testament, that means every one of us is one of the saints. So if you want to see what a saint looks like - take a good, long, hard look at the person sitting next to you! Go on! Take a look! That person is indeed one of the saints.

We sometimes look at the paintings of the saints that are in churches and museums and think that they represent what being a saint is all about. These representations, often in stain glass windows, show people looking very calm, holy, and pious with a halo to boot. The point of these images, of course, is to keep the memory and stories of these people before us. But if we were to have some of these folk to dinner, we would very likely get quite a shock. Most of the saints were never satisfied with doing what we've always done. They were movers and shakers who disturbed the status quo. They often led exciting lives. Some of them were fanatics who went on mad escapades. Many approached life in completely novel and fresh ways. But the reason we remember them is because when we looked at them their lives were for us windows into God. We could see more clearly through their lives what God is like.

The New Testament, however, would not restrict the term "saint" to the heroes of the faith. The New Testament writers called all the people of God "saints". If you want to live like one of the saints, live the Beatitudes in Matthew's gospel. The Beatitudes are widely understood to sum up the teaching of Christ. They are to the New Testament what the 10 commandments are to the old. Be pure in heart, mourn the injustices we see in the world, hunger and thirst for what is right, but be merciful also, be peacemakers, be willing to face the cost of being faithful and for working for justice; these are the things the saints of God are called to be concerned about.

As part of our celebration today, we will recall those we have known and loved in our prayer – those who have led us in the way of the gospel – our loved ones for whom we still mourn.

The Christian faith proclaims that there is life after death. The exact form and shape of that life we can only imagine. This is the point of the readings before us today. In death we rest in God. Those

who believe in Christ will never die, but will live. None of us really knows in a scientifically definitive sense what life after death actually looks like. What the Christian faith does is to make sense of death by placing it within the scheme of Christ's death and resurrection giving the promise and hope of a future with God for those who love God. This does not mean that the pain and loss of death is taken away or even somehow diminished. What our faith provides is a great deal of hope and consolation for those who suffer the sadness and pain which accompanies the death of someone we love.

There is one important story in scripture that helps us make sense of death, from which we can derive two metaphors. The story, of course, is the death of Jesus which the New Testament interprets as a new Exodus. One of the Greek words used for death in the New Testament is the word "Exodus". On the Mount of Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah talk with Jesus about his forthcoming departure. The Greek word there is "Exodus". So "Exodus" is the first metaphor we can use to make sense of death. Death is a journey into God, toward our final reconciliation with God. The first Exodus story, of course, is the great departure that Moses and the people of God made out of Egypt into the Promised Land. Here, we can begin to see the multiple ways the bible uses the word death. Death is also as a metaphor for life without God so that we can be in a kind of living death while we are still on earth. In the Exodus story, death is equated with the hellish existence of slavery in Egypt. Little surprise therefore that death and sin are often linked together in the discourse of St Paul. The journey is the sojourn into a fullness of relationship with God in the Promised Land where the milk and honey flows and there is feasting forever.

In Christ, this metaphor of journey is expanded. Jesus' death and resurrection is the New Testament Exodus story recapitulated and given new meaning. Slavery in Egypt is now the alienation from God brought about by sin. The Promised Land towards which we journey is the fullness of a relationship with Christ; its consummation is our final meeting with Christ in heaven. Passing through the water of the Red Sea becomes baptism. In some circles it has become quite unfashionable to talk about heaven these days. Some think it's too literalistic to use language like that. But I think we should reclaim it. Heaven is the language we use for life with God. It is a reality that we carry around with us, for the only real life is God, and we are privileged to share it. Heaven is the final consummation of our journey into fullness of relationship in Christ who is our Promised Land and our Passover Feast.

So the first metaphor that gives meaning to death is that of the Exodus journey. But there is another metaphor the bible uses to make sense of death too and that is the metaphor of rebirth; being born again. Death is like a second birth. Just as there were hands that received us when we were born into this world, so there will be hands to receive us when we are born again into the next. Again this is linked to baptism, which is our spiritual rebirth. S. Paul describes baptism as a real death. In Baptism we join ourselves to Christ's death so that we might be joined with his resurrection. It is a letting go; allowing something to die so that something else can be reborn. Our ego is put to death; the part of us that needs to be the boss, that needs to be the star or the wise one or the special one, the part of us that demands loyalty, perfection, or peace at any cost, that will do anything to belong and to be liked. Of course, this is a life long journey. In our journey with God these parts of us die so that the real authentic person God created can be reborn and grow and flourish.

Today in our prayers, we will pray for those we have known and loved. In some parts of the Anglican Church the idea that we can pray for those who have died raises a lot of anxiety. It might help our understanding if we realize that the church has always remembered the dead as part of our life of prayer. We have remembered the saints on their anniversaries and asked God for strength to follow in their footsteps. In the 1662 Book of Common Prayer the general intercessions include a prayer for the faithful departed. Archbishop Cranmer put it this way: "And we also bless thy holy name for all servants departed this life in they faith and fear; beseeching thee to give us grace so to follow their good examples, that with them we may be partakers of thy heavenly kingdom."

We bring to memory our dead in prayer because the Christian faith declares that life is not ended in death. We believe in the resurrection, in a new form of existence with God beyond death. Through Christ, we remain in relationship with those who have died and who have joined the company of heaven. Our relationship with those who have died is changed, but it is not ended. In our prayers today there will be a time for lighting candles for our loved ones. If you are not sure what to pray as you light your candle, simply ask Jesus to pass on a message of love to those for whom you wish to pray. That way, you are expressing your love for that person in your prayer, and your prayer is addressing Christ and asking him to pass that love on. We can rest assured that the company of heaven are praying for us and cheering us on as we run the race set before us.

The church is not just you and me gathered here on earth. The church includes the whole company of heaven. All the members of the Body care and pray for one another, whether we happen to be on

this side of the grave or beyond it. In Jesus, death and time are transcended and we are united in one body. As we make our prayers let us chose life today. We pray for ourselves, that we may grow into the love of God where all that is good may be perfected, and all that is wrong will be healed, and that death when it comes, will hold no fear for us.