

ALL SAINTS' SUNDAY 2019 St David's Eucharist

The C of E doesn't create saints, it simply allocates days when certain Christians, notable for their witness or contribution to the life of the Church, are remembered, letting their lives speak for themselves.

Our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers are much more methodical and there is a whole department, or congregation, of that Church dedicated to assessing the lives of the faithful and determining whether they are sufficiently notable, significant and spirit-filled to warrant the title of 'Saint'.

One Sunday recently, when I was unable to get to church, the Pope canonised (declared saints) five different Christians and the Mass was broadcast from St Peter's Square by Vatican tv. I watched it because one of those being declared a saint was John Henry Newman, a former Anglican priest who famously converted to catholicism in 1845 and eventually rose to become a cardinal.

He was the writer of some of our best known hymns - *Lead, Kindly light, Firmly I believe and truly, Praise to the holiest in the height.*

His influence was huge, but it was a quiet revolution, resulting eventually, many would say, in the major reforms of the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s when Pope John XXIII declared he wanted to ‘throw open the windows of the Church’. Newman was a firm believer in the power of education to improve people’s lives and open new possibilities for them and founded a university. He was a deep thinker himself and became a renowned theologian of his day. But he was also a man who remained a pastor, such that his funeral in Birmingham drew thousands of people from all walks of life onto the streets of the city.

Because of Newman and the Oxford Movement of which he was a leading light until his conversion, we celebrate this Eucharist in the way we do here; with processions, lights, cross, servers and the wearing of vestments, in a church where the altar and the sacrament celebrated on it is elevated as the principal focus beneath an elaborate reredos reminding us of the saints and angels of heaven who join us at every eucharistic celebration.

Saints make a difference, they open our eyes to truth and show us what Christianity looks like in a real human life, with all the ambiguities and struggles and suffering of life, but revealing nonetheless a shaft of light, a sense of joy, an outpouring of love for others which somehow transcend everything else, so their lives become a witness and source of inspiration and hope - not just for other Christians but for any who get to know them.

So saints epitomise and demonstrate the qualities we read about in the scriptures today.

Chapter 7 of Daniel represents a shift of perspective in that book and we move from stories about Daniel to a first-person account of his strange, apocalyptic visions, here of beasts arising out of the sea, whose reign will nonetheless be overcome by 'the holy ones of the most high'.

Here in this strange kind of writing with weird beasts and apocalyptic scenarios we encounter the sheer strangeness of creation, its amazing variety, its wonder, its otherness.

Did you see the first of David Attenborough's new series, *Seven worlds, one planet*? Amongst other things there were amazing pictures of a weird underwater world where the strangest of creatures live. That's just one example. I've never seen the Northern Lights, but I expect some of you have. It is a spectacular phenomenon evidently, filling you with a sense of the vastness of creation and its amazing beauty. We may now understand the causes of this natural spectacle scientifically, but we can readily see why the ancients thought of it as a spiritual wonder because it still appeals to ours too.

We live in a mind-boggling creation; apocalyptic writing points us to that - and so do saints. One of the interesting things about the RC process of canonisation is that to be named a saint at least two miracles have to be attributed to their intercession. In Newman's case the second was the miraculous and instantaneous healing of a life-threatening haemorrhage - just like the woman in the gospels who touches the hem of Jesus' robe.

Such healings have to be accompanied by medical evidence and are assessed by a completely independent medical panel who have to be convinced that there is no ordinary medical explanation for the cure. The healed woman was present at the canonisation.

Turning to the Ephesian letter, the writer shows how all the wonder and mystery and power of God in creation is focussed and made real and manifest in Jesus Christ. Jesus the man is also the divine Christ and the origin of the gift of the Holy Spirit who leads us into his life and opens us to share it. 'God put [his] power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places.'

We, together with all the saints, share in that spiritual power which enables us to live and work and grow in a way that reflects the life of Christ within us. Like Christ himself we become a focus of God's action in the world, testifying to the reality of his presence and to demonstrate that we become truly ourselves, fully alive as we open ourselves more and more to the action of the Holy Spirit within us.

We will become more authentic human beings, revealing to others a purpose in which they too can share if they will.

And what of the Gospel? What does that tell us about what it means to be a Christian? Here is the classic text of Christian behaviour. It speaks of adversity, poverty, hunger and sorrow and how, in the alchemy of the Spirit's power, they can become a doorway into a closer union with God and are mysteriously transformed into blessing. When you're rich and well-fed and life is fun, you're also immunised from other people; you don't need them and you're free to live in a world of your own making, but one which is ultimately empty and barren.

When we visit my son in Bristol we get to watch another episode of *The Crown* on Netflix. The other day we watched an episode about the Duke of Windsor and his attempt to be rehabilitated to serve his country as he says. This is prefaced by a sequence showing an extravagant fancy-dress party at their elegant house in the Bois de Boulogne. There are masks, gorgeous costumes, bizarre get-ups, drinks, laughter, a world of wealth, privilege - and emptiness.

The duke and duchess withdraw and sit by themselves, their false crowns now discarded beside them, disconsolate and unhappy as the surrounding jollity only emphasises the vacuous nature of the life they have come to lead.

‘But I say to you that listen. Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you if anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.’

All these things Jesus does at his Passion, struck and abused but making no answer, stripped of his garments and cursed by those who crucify him. In this gospel Jesus will pray, ‘Father, forgive them, they don’t know what they’re doing.’

The life of the saint - and we are all called to be one - is marked by a generosity of spirit and merciful judgment. A life in which violence, hatred and revenge have no place because the focus of such a life is on the well-being of the other. We will of course fall short - and the ones the Church recognises as saints would be the first to agree; they know their own shortcomings all too well.

We are able to become saints only and solely by the grace of God who loves us, forgives us and remakes us, time after time after time.

These scriptures are all about truth: the truth about the wonder and mystery of the creation, which even more wonderfully we are privileged to realise as no other creature on earth does. The truth about our destiny and purpose to become like Jesus Christ, men and women who live ordinary lives in all the ambiguities and contradictions and sorrows of what it is to be human. But also as sharers in love, and joy and hope and a peace that passes understanding as we live amongst others and share their lives with ours. And the truth about what opens the gate to a lovelier and better way of living, one that is authentic and substantial, one where there is mercy and peace and goodwill.

In a world obsessed with image - nothing new in that, think of Narcissus - a world in which a president obsessed with 'fake news' can watch images of an actual raid and say, revealingly, 'It was like watching a movie'; a world in which Facebook image or personality replaces the real person - hence the angst of Harry and Meghan; a world where we are fed not good news but bad news by the media.

This is the world we are called to be in as saints, authentic people who believe there is such a thing as truth, people who are sources of light, of love and of a joy that cannot be taken from us, so that others can see the true reality of the wonder and beauty of creation and the fact that its creator loves it - and loves us - so much that he came to share it with us to transform us and reveal our true inner substance.

‘Praise to the holiest in the height, and in the depth be praise.

In all his works most wonderful, most sure in all his ways.’