

# Sermon Notes

**St Mark's Anglican Church  
South Hurstville**

## **Mary Andrews Village Thanksgiving Service 1 November 2007**

**Preacher  
The Reverend Chris Albany  
Rector**

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Readings: Luke 6. 20-31

### **Communion of Saints**

Hello Mary Andrew's saints. New Testament writers drew deeply on the Jewish tradition of the holy people of God to describe their own community. Over 60 times in the New Testament the word 'saints' is used to describe the members of the early Christian communities. Too often theology has squeezed this inclusive meaning of the communion of saints dry, eliminating most baptized persons from sainthood in favour of a small group of elite office-holders or canonized saints. But this woefully short changes the gift of God, whose gracious mercy through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ calls, blesses, and sends forth the whole people of God.

The church is not divided into saints and non-saints. Vivified by grace, every woman, man, and child, in whatever diverse circumstances and of whatever race, class, ethnicity, sexual persuasion, or any other marker that both identifies and divides human beings, participates in God's holy life. The vocation to be friends of God, and prophets, shapes the life of everyone in the community. So, Hello, saints!

You may say "I'm no saint," but in truth you are created in the image of God, graced by Christ, called and gifted in the Spirit. In other words, if you do not see yourself as holy then you are robbing yourself of your heritage and true identity. It is yours – given as gift – all you have to do to fully appropriate it is to say your yes to God so it no longer remains latent and unexperienced. Christians cling to the hope that not even death "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:39). Hence, early on they concluded that the communion of saints is not restricted to persons who live and breathe at the present moment but also includes those who have died. On this All Saints day I want us to explore the richness of the reality we call the Communion of Saints.

For the Christian community, the bedrock of faith is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This cruel death was a real death; it violently tore apart his whole life, no piece of him slipping through its mesh. In face of this destruction, the Easter message proclaims that the crucified one dies not into nothingness but into the absolute mystery of the glory of God. Starting with Mary Magdalene, the disciples announce Vivit - he lives: the godforsaken one lives forever with God as pledge of the future of all the dead. While this is utterly unimaginable and cannot be reduced to a kind of physiological miracle, it nevertheless affirms that Jesus in his whole person and in all dimensions of his historical existence has entered into a new and different brilliance of life in the embrace of God.

There is a precise correlation between the Spirit of God who gives life to the dead and the action of the same Creator Spirit who brings the world into being. In both cases one begins with virtually nothing: no world, no future for a dead person. Then the vivifying breath of the Spirit moves over the void. "In the beginning," this creates the world; in the moment of death, this carries persons through perishing into new life. The Nicene Creed traces this logic, starting with belief in God who makes heaven and earth, and ending with belief in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Thus, hope in eternal life for oneself and others is not some curiosity tacked on as

an appendage to faith, but is faith itself brought to its radical depth. It is faith in the living God that does not stop halfway but follows the road consistently to the end, trusting that the God of the beginning is also the God of the end, who faithfully utters the same word in each case: let there be life. There is, then, reason to hope that persons are not lost in death but are enfolded into the mystery of the gracious being of God which to us is darkness but to them is the fulfilment of their lives in the sphere of the Spirit. All the biblical images of light, banquet, harvest, rest, singing, homecoming, reunion, tears wiped away, seeing face to face, and knowing as we are known, point to a deep, living communion in God's own life. The loving, faithful character of God is the foundation for including the dead in the communion of saints. They die not into nothingness but "into the embrace of God."

The company of saints in heaven beggars description. While a few are remembered by name, millions upon anonymous millions of others are also included—people who made some personal contribution to the amount of goodness there is in the world.

Among these saints are numbered also some whom we know personally. Their number increases as we get older: grandparents, mother and father, sisters and brothers, beloved spouses and life partners, children, teachers, fellow students, patients, clients, friends and colleagues, relatives and neighbours, spiritual guides and religious leaders. Their lives, complete with fault and favour, have reached journey's end. Gone from us, they have arrived home within the embrace of God. To say of all these people that they form with us the company of the redeemed is to give grief a direction, affirming that in the end God graciously has the last word, which is life.

When we alive today seek to relate to this great multitude that has gone before us, we discern in biblical and early Christian texts a pattern of relationship modelled on companionship, it names those who have died as friends and fellow travellers in the one Spirit-filled community. This pattern of relationship thanks God for the lives of those who have gone before us and remembers them in such a way as to awaken hope in the midst of current struggles.

In the New Testament letter to the 'Hebrews' the author writes: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith ..." (Heb 12:1-2). The image here is of a stadium packed with a crowd, each of whom had once run the race, now cheering for those on the tarmac. Here the faithful dead are not proposed as the objects of a cult nor even as exemplars to be imitated, but as a throng of faithful people whose journey we continue to share. Their courage and ultimate victory awaken hope that we too might win the race. It is a matter of being inspired by the whole lot of them, this cloud of witnesses to the living God.

Their adventure of faith opened a way for us, and now we go ahead of others in an ongoing river of companions seeking God. And when our own journey grows hard, we can draw strength from the memory of our forebears' sufferings and victories: St Augustine says "How can the way be rough when it has been smoothed by the feet of so many walking ahead of us?" (S. 306). In these words, one gets a strong sense of connectedness that is brought about by the act of remembrance. In this companionship model, the communion of saints is a disciplined way of remembering that connects us together and empowers and encourages us in our own struggles for justice, peace, wholeness of life.

The communion of saints affirms that within the embrace of the one Spirit, all are being shaped into a community that is one of companionship rather than dominant-subordinate relations; a community, furthermore, that connects different racial, ethnic, and cultural groups, women with men, the poor and marginalized with the powerful, the old with the young and all of these living

with the dead and the yet to be born.

May we, inspired by those who have gone before, give ourselves to be people of faith and hope and love as we live out Easter faith and hope as the saints of God in this place today and so help prepare the way those perhaps not yet born to follow after.

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With acknowledgement to thoughts and ideas taken from Elizabeth A Johnson, author of, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints*, New York, Continuum, 1998.