

Choral Evensong for the Feast of All Saints

St Mark's Anglican Church, South Hurstville

The Twenty-third Sunday after Trinity – 4th November 2018

A Sermon delivered by the Rev. Antony Weiss - Assistant Minister at Christ Church St Laurence and Chaplain to St Paul's College within the University of Sydney

*John 17: 18-23*¹

Good afternoon. Firstly, I bring greetings from the Rector, Wardens and people of Christ Church St Laurence, a distinctive and important church of and within the Diocese of Sydney, known to and admired by many here at St Mark's South Hurstville.

Although this is my first visit to St Mark's, I know your curate Steve Walker and his wife Liz as well as the student ministers from Moore Theological College.

And I'll let you into a secret: your Rector, whose kind invitation is the reason I am here with you at this service of Choral Evensong for All Saints, is a former pupil of mine. Yes, Peter and his twin Michael were both in my top set Form I Latin class at Shore thirty years ago, they then 12 and I, a 21-year-old newbie to the teaching game, I'm not sure who was the rawer and more untried, the Greenwood boys or I...

Let us pray...

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, +O LORD, our Rock and Redeemer. AMEN.

From the 20th verse of the 17th Chapter of the Gospel According to St John we read, "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one."

John 17 is one of the most compelling chapters in this Gospel; a chapter in which we see Our Lord Jesus Christ addressing an extended prayer to His Heavenly Father, here before us, a prayer of intercession reflecting the divine unity of the Father and the Son.

Jesus' prayer is totally undergirded in this indivisible unity, the inseparable communion between the Father and the Son during Our Lord's earthly ministry.

Our Second Lesson shows how Jesus prays for the unity and oneness of His disciples and therefore His people, the true saints, the champions of the Faith.

¹ In preparing this sermon, I found the commentary of John Charles Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: St John* (vol. 3, 3 vols; London: James Clarke & Co., 1865) to be particularly helpful.

All Saints is a feast day now largely lost in many Christian traditions, including our own in Sydney. Traditionally, All Saints' Day, is celebrated in honour of "all the saints", known and unknown. It remains a public holiday in countries such as France which is rather ironic for that nation's love of and recognition of the Gospel has long waned.

The concept of 'saints' is these days confusing because in Roman Catholic theology, the term 'Saint' is reserved for those individuals who have led a holy and exemplary life and have now entered Heaven. The process of becoming a Saint is termed canonization and the first known canonization was of Ulric of Augsburg in 973.

Within the Roman Catholic Church there exists a special department (The Congregation for the Causes of Saints), which oversees the whole process. They would thoroughly investigate the life of the individual, checking for orthodox belief and any miracles claimed as a result of their intercession. The appearance of miracles is taken that the person is now in heaven and can intercede for 'believers' as part of the Roman church's misconception of the 'Communion of Saints'.

Once the Congregation for the Causes of Saints has completed its work, the Pope may issue a decree declaring the person to be 'Blessed', that is, beatified. Once beatified, another miracle is then required to allow the Pope to declare the individual a saint. A feast day may then be allocated, and veneration of the saint encouraged.

Roman Catholic theology indicates that those saints, now in Heaven, are able to intercede, not only for those on Earth, but also those in Purgatory. Their intercession is considered to be effective on account of their closeness to God. Also, those on Earth can intercede for those in Purgatory...

Thanks be to God for the Reformation and particularly Thomas Cranmer, (1489-1556) - the first Protestant archbishop of Canterbury (1533-56), and primary author of the Book of Common Prayer and the Articles of Religion - our biblical Anglican doctrinal position clearly differs.

Article XXII, *Of Purgatory* states, "THE Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory, Pardons, Worshipping, and Adoration, as well of Images as of Reliques, and also invocation of Saints, is a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God."²

Scripture does not support the Roman Catholic understanding of what constitutes a saint.

² *Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1662).

In the New Testament, saint is applied to all believers. The saints constitute the church, the gathered people of God, “those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.” (1 Cor 1:2)

In Ephesians, there is the strong emphasis on the unity of the church and “all the saints” becomes a kind of refrain (Eph 1:15, 3:8, 18; 6:18).

And, of course, the Apostles’ Creed enshrines the significance of the word in the statement, ““I believe in the Holy Ghost; The holy Catholick Church; The Communion of Saints...”

And this is what we ascribe to as Anglicans whose doctrine is founded on the Word of God, again thanks to Cranmer, a proponent of unity and uniformity at a crucial time in the life of the Church. He put the English Bible in all parish churches across the land with the Book of Common Prayer to be the only approved form of Divine Worship. And with its focus on the public reading of scripture Cranmer enabled the Anglican Church to become the greatest Bible-reading church in Christendom.

And why? Because he and the Reformers believed in the Doctrine of the Sufficiency of Scripture, i.e. “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that [we] may be complete, equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim 3:15-17)

So, turning further to our Second Lesson, we have verses, which form a fitting conclusion of this great prayer from the words of Jesus containing petitions that the Lord Jesus offered up on behalf of His disciples.

Jesus prays that His people may be sanctified, “And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.” (Jn 17:19)

Sanctify means to “make holy” and Jesus’ prayer is that the Father would make His people more holy, more spiritual, more pure, more Godly in thought, word and deed.

This is not the reserve of the examples of Christians recommended by the ‘Congregation for the Causes of Saints’ deemed worthy of beatification by the Pope in order to become conduits between believers via the church to God in heaven. As if the Work of Christ requires some supplementing.

For if this were true, what would it say about the power of Christ’s atoning death on the Cross and this assurance that “... God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life?” Should this promise require any further intercessory actions by deceased saints than the Lord Jesus Himself?

No, not the Bishop of Rome, not the Archbishop of Canterbury, not any priest, no, not any of those who have died in the Faith can achieve what Christ as the great Head of the Church on our behalf.

In our reading Jesus prays that through the work of grace God's people, "[the]elect in one communion and fellowship, in the mystical body of Christ" may be more thoroughly sanctified, and made holy in body, soul and spirit - In other words, through Jesus to be more like Him, to be Jesus looking people who will day by day plant their footsteps in those of our Lord.

Such call to holy living, the sanctified life, is exactly what all followers of Christ are to crave. And as such, we are called to demonstrate evidence of it in of our own godly lives to let our light shine before [others] in such a way that they may see our good works, and glorify our Father who is in heaven. (Mat 5: 16)

We know that there are members of our families, our friends and colleagues who are not won by the Gospel (1 Pet. 1:3) but God willing if they see the saints, God's people here on earth, living out the Gospel they profess they will see God's glory at work. We are to pray that the world may believe that God has sent His Son...and that God loves them even as God has loved His Son. (Jn 17:23)

Also, Holy living prepares us for heaven. The nearer we live to God while we are in this life, the readier we shall be to dwell with Him in His presence when we die to be with Jesus and all the company of the saints with the assurance that our entrance into heaven is through the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God.

And if our living remains in its unsanctified state, we are to make changes. When we stumble, we're to repent and pick ourselves up and continue to run the race for we must never deceive ourselves thinking that by looking the part in terms of our Christian walk we're right before God.

Our passage then focusses on how Jesus prays for the unity and oneness of His people with these petitions to His Father, "I ask not only on behalf of these [the disciples], but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word [the saints, the believers who come after them], that they may all be one." Then... "The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one..."

Here Jesus prays again for Christian unity for, as we know, Christian history has been and is wracked with divisions amongst believers.

How often do we as Christians waste our energy in contending against our brothers and sisters in Christ when there is a much bigger enemy out there; sin, the world and the devil?

During Jesus' ministry, he prayed that his future followers would exhibit unity that would be a testimony to the world. So where have we gone awry?

Christians are often known for their squabbles and divisions. Even when we appear to get along, we divide up into hundreds of different groups, churches, and denominations. For those who are not Christians, it seems confusing and for the Roman Catholic Church it only adds to their claim to be the appointed the 'one' Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.

Closer to home, what about how we as Sydney Anglicans have projected ourselves recently both in synod and through the communication of Sydney Anglican schools to Members of Parliament?

One respected Sydney rector stood up at Synod and said, "When our reputation in society inhibits our ability to share the gospel we should be worried... If we continue to damage our reputation we will become completely ineffective... so dominated by what we as a Diocese oppose, that it completely fails to identify what we stand for..."

Jesus' foresaw such internal tensions and it is why He prayed so earnestly that believers "may be one [as He and the Father] are one." (Jn 17:22b)

In 2014 I was encouraged by the Shore chaplain and his wife to head to Moore Theological College to train for gospel ministry something I never thought could be possible in this Diocese considering my church background, my age and being an unmarried man. Do you know how I responded? "Moore College? They won't put up with me and I don't think I could put up with them!"

I had been an occasional worshipper at Christ Church St Laurence months after I gave my life to Christ on 1st August 1993 but and from 2011 CCSL became my home church. Regarding ordained ministry I had preconceived ideas about Moore College and as such I felt that being a parishioner at Christ Church St Laurence would preclude me from candidacy in this Diocese knowing the long-held tensions which exist.

Going back to full-time study in 2015 was a shock in itself (now I know how your rector may have felt in my Form I Latin class!) but on top of that, there were comments like "How do you reconcile being a Christian and attending Christ Church St Laurence." Then at CCSL I was regarded by some as "a Moore College plant" as if I were there as some kind of spy!

Well in February this year I was Ordained by the Archbishop of Sydney, licensed to the Parish of CCSL and also St Paul's College whilst still completing the final year of the BD at Moore College.

It seems that no-one has, in living memory, or perhaps ever, gone to Moore College from Christ Church St Laurence and was ordained in this Diocese... a rather sad state of affairs if it is indeed a fact.

Well what's my point?

Well, yes, going to Moore College has best thing I have ever done save becoming a Christian. The Diocese could not have been more supportive; the Archbishop, my regional bishop, the principal, faculty and students of Moore College not to mention my Rector and the parish of Christ Church St Laurence.

I have found that the barriers that were there and that we so readily put up on whichever side of churchmanship we stand are just that barriers, stumbling blocks to the Gospel.

These barricades need to come down even when things are not quite as we would like, and I suspect there are some at St Mark's for whom there is some resonance in what I am saying.

But there's a caveat; the unity for which our Lord prays is not for the unity of forms of worship, church traditions and the like but the unity of heart, and doing God's will, and keeping to the Word of God, to our doctrines and by living the sanctified life.

Unlike in Cranmer's day, there is to be unity without necessarily uniformity, across denominations and within them. Just look at Sydney Anglicans...Evangelical, High Church, Anglo-Catholic, some may say Charisgelical or Anglo-Baptists even!

We must look the truth that unites us faithfully; teaching the Word of God, duly administering "... Sacraments ordained of Christ our Lord in the Gospel, that is to say, Baptism, and the Supper of the Lord" (Article XXV, *Of the Sacraments*)³ according to Anglican doctrine and practice and not watering down the Gospel to please the world remembering that "we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God." (2 Cor 2:12)

The unity which Jesus is praying about in our Second Lesson is that true, substantial, spiritual, internal heart unity which is the Divine calling among all true members of the body of Christ, the true saints, the holy ones in Christ... a unity that comes from the Holy Spirit's indwelling in believers' minds and hearts, the unity which must be founded on the bedrock of Holy Scripture reflected in the "...unity of [the] Godhead there be three Persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost." (Article I, *Of Faith in the Holy Trinity*)⁴

³ *Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments.*

⁴ *Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments.*

Let the recollection of Christ's prayer abide in our minds and exercise a constant influence on our behaviour as Christians putting aside our divisions and quibbles for "I tell you this, brothers [and sisters, as fellow Christian saints]: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God...Therefore...be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain (1 Cor 15:50,58)" and "that together you [with all the saints] may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Rom 15:6)

+In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,

AMEN.