

ADDRESS**3 November 2019****All Saints' Evensong**

Deuteronomy 33.1-3	Moses' blessing
Psalms 149	God's faithful ones
Hebrews 12.18-24	Gathering at Mount Zion

During the week, Marty and I went to a conference in Canberra, and had a ride on the new light rail. We noticed that the station announcements were made in four different voices – first a woman, then a man, then a girl, then a boy. I asked why the different voices, and was told, *We have to be inclusive.*

In the world of political correctness we may be identified by our age, and our gender, perhaps I should say, by the gender we affirm. In God's world we are simply identified by whether or not we love him, we are either saints or we are not, we honour and love God, or we do not. Age and gender are irrelevant.

We use the word 'saint' for three lots of people– there are the saints of the church: St Mary, St Mark, St Andrew . . . and hundreds more, at least up to the Reformation, men and women whom we honour in the church calendar and try to model our lives on; then there are the saints of the Bible, God's faithful ones, our psalm today calls them, the great multitude of believers whom no one can number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages; and then there are the so-called saints of the NRL and AFL, who are not always good moral examples.

What do the saints of the church have in common? To begin with, they are all dead. They may be canonised after their death, but many of them were very controversial in life. Many of them were in conflict with the institutional church – examples of a loving, inclusive Christianity at odds with a harsh, condemning churchianity.

The feast of All Saints began in the 8th century, when the Western church decided to sacralise an ancient Celtic festival of the dead just as it had sacralised the festival of the winter solstice in the 3rd century by beginning to celebrate the birth of Christ on 25th December. Yuletide had become Christmas; now Samhain, [Sow-en] on the first of November, became All Saints Day,

Today, in popular culture, All Saints' Day, and All Souls' Day following, are being swallowed up in a return of the pagan festival of the dead, marketed as Halloween, and marketed very profitably. In 12 centuries, much of the world has come full circle – from pagan to Christian and back.

Our liturgies and our hymns honour the saints of the Church, but we also need to honour the saints of the Bible, God's holy ones, living as well as dead. They include the leaders of the

Israelites, whom Moses blessed before his death, and they include the people of the new covenant sealed by the self-sacrifice of Jesus, described in such vivid language in our second lesson today. And they could, and should, include us. We can both honour them and strive to emulate them.

One of the great images of the saints of the Bible is in the first letter of Peter, chapter 2: *like living stones, you are being built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ* (1 Pe. 2.5).

Living stones are the men and women who are building their lives on the foundation of Jesus Christ, the one whom the majority of the world's people reject, but whom God has chosen as the keystone, the cornerstone, of his kingdom. Saints, living stones, not only believe in God, but do their best to obey his commandments.

The letter of Peter may be using the image in a double sense – living stones are those who are building the church, as well as their lives, on the foundation of the life and death and resurrection of the Saviour, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God in place of the old Temple sacrifices.

A major problem for many parishes is that too many of its stones are dead stones – people who come to services but play little or no part in building up the spiritual and communal life of the parish. They take what the church offers, but give little or nothing in return. As a result, too many parishes have too few people doing too much. Ask any minister.

If we are to become saints, holy ones, in the Biblical sense, we begin while we are alive. The letter of Peter gives us some pointers:

- 1 We accept that having faith is counter-cultural – our beliefs and our life style may be rejected by the majority. We worship God on Sundays while most people are still in bed, or preparing for a Sunday drive, or to play sport, or attend a family birthday party. We honour God with our money, and we place our savings in ethical investments rather than chasing the highest returns. We are faithful to one sexual partner, treating sex as a sign of commitment, not as a competitive sport. In short, we love God as fully as we can and try to love others as much as ourselves.
- 2 We accept that we are **being** built up, we are not building ourselves up – we are **being** shaped, we are not shaping ourselves: being holy is living in obedience to God, as we understand God's will, being holy is trying to pleasing God rather than pleasing ourselves.
- 3 We accept that becoming holy is a continuing process – we can never say, or even think, 'I am a holy one, I am a saint'; we can only say something like, 'I am doing God's will as far as I can, in the strength which Jesus gives me'.

- 4 We accept that becoming holy involves sacrifice – we give up some earthly pleasures for the greater delight of living in obedience to God’s will as revealed in the Scriptures and in our prayers.

But, in allowing ourselves to become stones living for God, we can learn a lot from the examples of the saints honoured by the church.

Recently, I was reading the life of St Don Bosco, a priest who worked in Turin in the 19th C. He was so dedicated to the welfare of the children working in the city’s factories or living on the city’s streets that some of his fellow priests believed he was insane. One day, they sent two strong priests in a carriage to carry him to the city asylum. Don Bosco whacked the carriage horse on the rump, as he shouted, “Take **these** men to the asylum. They are waiting for them there”.

Who is the insane one? – the one who lives for God, and abides for ever in his love, or the one who lives by the standards of the world, and for whom death is truly the end of life? Why do so many people focus their lives on accumulating ‘stuff’, which may be taken away in skiploads after their death?

48 years after his death, the church recognized Don Bosco as a saint, but the children of Turin knew that he was a holy one, a living stone, years before he passed over to God. They recognised him as a saint by what he did, as well as by what he said.

Lord, lead us into holiness. May your will be done in us today, and every day.