

20141102AllSaintsSundaySermon

As I'm sure you have all realised by now, good church music plays an important part in my life as a worshipping Christian. The other day I started wondering when that developed in me. I thought back to the Scripture Union missions held on Fish Hoek beach in the late 1950s. We used to sing choruses and have bible readings and a short address each morning. The choruses we sang were typical Alexander Hymnal choruses – such as “He lives, he lives, Christ Jesus lives today, he walks with me and he talks with me along life's narrow way, he lives, he lives, Christ lives to day, you ask me how I know he lives, he lives within my heart.” One year, however, we sang “When I survey the wondrous cross...” and this made a huge impact on me. Why? I don't know – perhaps it was the words but I would like to think that the music had something which I had never experienced before; quite what I didn't know. With hindsight I dare say that the music quality was a hundred times better than the choruses I had sung on the beach up to then?

The only other time I had experienced that same feeling was when I had sung “For all the Saints...” for the first time at St Margaret's in Fish Hoek on All Saints Sunday. From that point on every year as a child I looked forward to All Saints-tide in anticipation of singing “For all the Saints”. The lusty singing of the “Alleluia, Alleluia” at the end of each verse was so special as was the broad expansive melody. Small wonder that in later years, the composer of this tune, Ralph Vaughan Williams, became my favourite composer.

People who follow Celtic Spirituality have a term they use when something special happens when the past, present, and future seem to intertwine, and the veil between this world and the next seems to become permeable. They call such times ‘a thin place’. It is a time when we must pay careful attention to what happens in our lives. Mostly what happens is that these ‘thin place’ moments offer a window onto our lives—a perspective that, however subtly, shifts how we see our path forward. Sometimes these thin places offer a doorway, a new threshold that changes everything.

I believe that that is what All Saints Season offers: a doorway, a window. But before we can explore where that doorway or window leads and what it might offer you, we need to de-bunk some things. Firstly, I need to ask you, “What is a saint?”

The English word saint is from the Latin *sanctus*, which means “to set apart”, “to sanctify” or “to make holy”. Each week we say *Holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty* – this is commonly called the *Sanctus*. In the New Testament the apostolic authors used the word saint not to refer to deceased persons who had been granted sainthood, but rather to living persons who had dedicated themselves to God. Set apart for God, made holy for God. In the Anglican Church, the title of Saint refers to a person who has been elevated by popular opinion as a pious and holy person.

The saints are seen as models of holiness to be imitated, and as a ‘cloud of witnesses’ that strengthen and encourage the believer during his or her spiritual journey. Hence those lovely verses from the Letter to the Hebrews: *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, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.* (Hebrews 12:1-2).

The saints are seen as elder brothers and sisters in Christ. Our creeds recognise the existence of the saints in heaven. Every time we recite the Apostles' Creed, we say we believe in “the communion of saints.” Robert Louis Stevenson put it succinctly: “The saints are the sinners who keep on going.” Are you a sinner? I'm sure you are all answering “yes” in your heart and mind. Are you keeping going in your faith journey as best you can? Once again I'm sure you are saying yes. Then you are a saint!

But what's good about being a saint? Can we expect a greater reward?

I want to explore two sources to answer this – both not surprisingly based on church music for All Saints’ Day. The first is the anthem that the choir will sing during Communion this morning. The words are from hymn 324: 1. *Give me the wings of faith to rise// Within the veil and see// The saints above, how great their joys,// How bright their glories be.* 3 *I ask them whence their victory came,// They with united breath,// Ascribe their conquest to the Lamb,// Their triumph to his death.* 4 *They marked the footsteps that he trod,// (His zeal inspired their breast); And following their incarnate God, Possess the promised rest.*

The words of this hymn-anthem are by Isaac Watts who also wrote “When I survey the wondrous cross” – that hymn that made such an impression on me as a ten year old. I wonder if my appreciation of this anthem developed from my beach mission experience? Watts, and us as we sing this hymn or anthem, asks for “Wings of faith” which can carry us to heaven to see the joyfulness and the bright glory of “the saints above”. He goes on to ask them what I asked just now. What makes being a saint so special? And how come they are numbered among the saints? The saints in unison “ascribe their victory to the lamb”, to Jesus, the lamb who died on the cross. As our revelation reading said: ¹⁰*They cried out in a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, **and to the Lamb!**’*

Have been set apart bec

How did these saints above become saints? Watts puts it quite clearly in his hymn: *They marked the footsteps that he trod,// (His zeal inspired their breast); And following their incarnate God,* they duly received their reward - they ...*Possess the promised rest.* This promised rest is for all of us who walk in the steps of Christ. We too will be numbered among the saints.

That brings me to my second example – that hymn that is listed among my favourites, that moved me as a child and still moves me today – *For all the saints who from their labours rest.* The opening verses are quite triumphant in tone and sung in unison by the choir and people. But suddenly at verse 4 it breaks into harmony- *“Oh, blest communion, fellowship divine,/we feebly struggle, they in glory shine; yet/all are one in thee, for all are thine.”* Now, that to me is the central message about being a saint, about becoming a saint. Yes, we may be struggling, we may be faltering, but we are part of that communion of saints right along with the apostles, with Augustine, Perpetua, Felicity, Jerome, Hildegard, Oscar Romero, Mother Teresa and a host of other people that we commemorate because they have been set apart, made holy. Just as we are. We **are** God’s children, and this is very good news indeed. We are loved, we are called ‘Children of God’, and even though we may not fully comprehend what it means to be part of that great communion of saints and the never-ending story, we are nonetheless included.

Our very calling as Christians is to reflect God’s great love and not our own pitiable attempts at goodness. As we reflect God’s great love we do so, so that the world may see God in us.

For me the ‘thin place occurs’ when music and words combine to lift me up in worship. It is this combination, as the choir anthem says that *Gives me the wings of faith to rise.* What creates your ‘thin place’? I’m sure it is different from mine. Perhaps it is silence rather than music? Loud worship rather than mystical liturgy? Mind challenging concepts and theological theories that have to be thought through? Whatever it may be, we still *feebly struggle* but we and the saints are one, one in God because we are God’s. And because of that, all we can do is sing *Alleluia! Alleluia! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen*