

20151101AllSaintsSermon

I think it was my Methodist minister, brother-in-law who asked me, once what was the difference between the Feast of All Saints and that of All Souls. Being facetious I said the one is on the 1st November and the other on the 2nd of November. That gave me an opportunity to think of a more sensible answer. I think I said something like, All Saints is when we remember those Christians who had died, not only those saints of old such as Peter, Paul, James and John but also many others such as Francis, Theresa of Avila, John of the Cross, William Wilberforce, John & Charles Wesley. Also don't forget that Paul refers to the believers in Rome as those 'who are called to be saints' – so we remember all Christian believers who have died in the faith. And John, my brother-in-law then said: "Oh. And All Souls? Do we remember those who didn't die in the faith?" Well, mmm, I think my Methodist brother-in-law got me there! So what is the difference?

Well, in the Roman Catholic Church All Souls was originally set up in order to pray for those didn't have a chance to make their confession before they died. According to Roman Catholic Theology they were now in purgatory and our prayers for them would help to reduce their time they have to spend there.

Now remembering that Google is my friend I googled: What is the difference between All Saints and All souls and I found the following answer: *The feast of All Saints is a very joyful day. We remember all of the saints who are in Heaven. It is not just about those saints who have been formally canonised by the Church. While we can be sure that the canonised saints are indeed in Heaven, since the Church was moved and guided to proclaim certain exceptional people saints, we know that there must be others who are in Heaven even though their place has not been formally pronounced on by the Church. We cannot be sure whether or not our family and friends are in Heaven yet, it is nice to remember that some of the people we may have known may already be rejoicing with all the other saints in Heaven. There is a change of mood and tone on the Commemoration of the Holy Souls. The focus is on those who are in Purgatory. That said, it is not all sadness for us who remember them, because we know that they are well on their way to Heaven. They are not yet saints in Heaven, but we know that one day they will join the great company of saints in Heaven. Our prayers for the Holy Souls - especially for family, friends and enemies - can hasten their onward journey to Heaven.* (This was obviously a Roman Catholic website with Roman Catholic Theology of purgatory being expressed.)

Now, I've bandied about that word 'SAINT' quite lot, but what is a saint? Whenever I say that phrase I think of Edward Elgar's setting of *The Dream of Gerontius* – words from a poem by John Henry Newman where the demons tempt the Soul of Gerontius as he ascends to God. The demons call out:

What's a saint? One whose breath

Doth the air taint -Before his death;

A bundle of bones, Which fools adore,

When life is o'er; Which rattle and stink,

E'en in the flesh....

Low-born clods Of brute earth

They aspire To become gods ...

Do you know something? Those demons are right! What is a saint – a human being, with bad breath, bones and flesh – just like us – created by God from the clods of the earth who because of Christ's incarnation, we together with them can strive, to aspire to be God.

The Canadian folk singer and poet Leonard Cohen in his book *Beautiful Losers* also asks: *What is a saint? A saint is someone who has achieved a remote human possibility. It is impossible to say what that possibility is.*

Perhaps that possibility is different for each of us but we tend to only see the impossibility and not the possibility of becoming a saint. Thomas Merton became a monk and a writer of books on spirituality. He tells his story in a biography called *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Before obeying God's call, a young Thomas Merton was walking down Sixth Avenue New York with his friend Lax on their way to Greenwich village. Merton writes: *The street was all torn up and trenched and banked high with dirt and marked out with red lanterns where they were digging the subway, and we picked our way along the fronts of the dark little stores on our way to Greenwich Village.*" And he writes that the moment *"turned out to be historical, as far as my own soul is concerned."* Lax puts into Merton's mind the unexpected thought that you could **desire** to be a saint. Let me quote from the book again:

I forget what we were arguing about, but in the end Lax suddenly turned around and asked me the question:

"What do you want to be, anyway?"

I could not say, "I want to be Thomas Merton the well-known writer of all those book reviews in the back pages of the Times Book Review," or "Thomas Merton the assistant instructor of Freshman English at the New Life Social Institute for Progress and Culture," so I put the thing on the spiritual plane, where I knew it belonged and said:

"I don't know; I guess what I want is to be a good Catholic."

"What do you mean, you want to be a good Catholic?"

The explanation I gave was lame enough, and expressed my confusion, and betrayed how little I had really thought about it at all. Lax did not accept it.

"What you should say" – he told me – "what you should say is that you want to be a saint."

A saint! The thought struck me as a little weird. I said:

"How do you expect me to become a saint?"

"By wanting to," said Lax simply.

"I can't be a saint," I said, "I can't be a saint." And my mind darkened with a confusion of realities and unrealities: the knowledge of my own sins, and the false humility which makes men say that they cannot do the things that they must do, cannot reach the level that they must reach: the cowardice that says: "I am satisfied to save my soul, to keep out of mortal sin," but which means, by those words: "I do not want to give up my sins and my attachments."

Do you desire to be a Saint? Edward Hays in a wonderful book entitled: *St George and the Dragon* tells the story of George who finds he has a deep desire in his heart to go on a quest. I've read the passage to you in the past so I'm not going to read it all to you again, but just to remind you how he takes a rusty sword he finds in his garage and goes off on a quest to rescue a maiden from a dragon. The dragon he comes across is friendly, caring and rather nice about it all. But he asks George what title George had. George said none so the Dragon gives him the title St – S.T. George protests that he is not good enough to be a saint. Echoes of Thomas Merton here isn't there. But the Dragon says to George that ST does not stand for Saint but SENT. George is being SENT. The rest of the book deals with the quest that George is **Sent** on.

Have you noticed when looking at art work depicting Saints how these art works depict gloomy, morose, unsmiling people? I'm sure that many of us look at these pictures and say, "No thanks. If that what a saint looks like forget it..." But here's a surprise: even the briefest glance at biographies of saints reveal joyful and energetic men and women who liked to have a laugh.

Indeed, the more you know about the actual lives of the saints, the more it strikes you as bizarre that so many statues, paintings and mosaics of the saints show them as unsmiling men and women. These are surely misrepresentations because many saints were not only joyful but had terrific senses of humour.

This reaches right back to the early Church. In the third century, Lawrence, who was burned to death on a grill, over hot coals, called out to his executioners, "This side is done. Turn me over and have a bite." In the fourth century, St. Augustine of Hippo, with a sense of humour prayed, "Lord, give me chastity ... but not yet."

Philip Neri, a 16th-century Italian priest, was called "The Humorous Saint." Much of his humour was a way of keeping himself humble. When a young priest asked Philip what prayer would be the most appropriate to say for a couple after a wedding Mass, the future saint said, "A prayer for peace."

Francis de Sales, the 17th-century bishop of Geneva and renowned spiritual master, was very sensible about our humanness. He wrote: *When you encounter difficulties and contradictions, do not try to break them, but bend them with gentleness and time.*

Even modern saints have a sense of humour. Pope John XXIII canonised very recently, served as pope from 1958 to 1963. His most famous joke came when a journalist innocently asked him, "Your Holiness, how many people work in the Vatican?" John paused, thought it over, and said, "About half of them."

So What's a saint? Another definition from Thomas Merton says: "To be a saint for me means to be myself." So, why don't you become a saint, be yourself as God created you to be. Walter Brueggeman says that saints are the women and men of faith through whose faces and lives the light comes. Does the light shine through your lives and your faces? Being a saint is something we are all called to be, we are all capable of being a saint, and I would like to think that we can all have the letters ST in front of our names, not only meaning SAINT in the canonised sense but meaning SENT as we are sent into the world with humour and humanness, with the light shining through our faces, being exactly who God created us to be and thus drawing others to Jesus. But more about that on the 15th of November when we celebrate Mission Sunday.