

St Mary Abbots

All Saints

Isaiah 65:17-end

Hebrews 11:32-12:2

So, we're here again: the nights are closing in, the rain has returned, and it will only be getting colder and darker for the next few months; when not long ago, we could have been sitting in the sun drinking a glass of rosé before an al fresco lunch. And with that, here we are at All Saints, with All Souls in a couple of days, but which we are marking this evening; and then Remembrance Sunday in a couple of weeks, and then on to Advent, nativity plays and finally Christmas. The relentlessness of the cycle of the year. But also the comfort of that pattern, as outside the growing night seems to make the world a bit comfortless.

Today, for All Saints, we are celebrating the saints and asking for their prayers, whereas at All Souls, we are praying *for* those who have gone before us, that they might rest in peace in the love of God.

Now, strictly speaking, when someone has achieved sanctity, when they are a saint, whether called as such by the church or not, there is no need to pray for them, because they are at rest. Whereas before someone has attained that we cannot ask for their prayers, because we cannot be assured of their place in heaven. But the reality with most people is that we do not know for sure; and there is nothing wrong with celebrating them today; giving thanks for their example; and asking for their prayers. And later, at All Souls, praying for their soul. In one sense that is covering both possibilities: acknowledging that they are now commended to God, in trust.

But in another sense this celebrating of the saints and asking for their prayers today, and praying for the dead later, reflects our connection with them, the ongoing relationship between us and those who have gone before; for the church is far bigger than us, than the living. It is timeless, and we are only a tiny part of the church of God that is both within history, rooted in the here and now, and eternal. Looking around this church, we few are members of the church of God alongside all who have worshipped in this place, in Kensington, over the centuries, and our prayers link us with them, just as those who pray for us after we are gone, those yet to be born, will be linked with us; are linked with us already in God's eyes. And today is about our place within that family of faith, within the chain handing on the faith from generation to generation.

We celebrate those who have worshipped in this building before; those who built it, full of confidence in the 1860s and 70s; those who have lit candles in here for the last 149 years, and indeed those who prayed faithfully in the church that was here before, living in the village of Kensington, separated by fields and parkland from the city of Westminster a few miles away. We celebrate those who have taught us the faith, who inspired us by their example, and those who taught them in turn, and those who taught them, reaching right back.

For those unknown heroes of the faith who carried out their good works in secret, telling no-one, and not appearing in the kalendar of saints; Those like Nicholas Winton, who saved 669 Jewish children in 1938 and didn't even tell his wife, who would find out when stumbling across a scrapbook some 50 years later. Those who have quietly cared for their families and taught their children to pray. Those who have had the courage to tell others of the joy of the faith that is within them, who have been lights in the world without seeking glory.

Today's readings are often used at funerals. On the face of it they look more suitable for All Souls. Yet, they remind us of this profound truth: that we are part of an eternal family, A family that on one level knows no discrimination between the living and the dead. As Christians we are as intimately involved with the saints who died in the year 80 and are buried in the Roman

catacombs, as we are with those who are alive now, because our shared identity in Christ is our primary identity.

The passage from the letter to the Hebrews is commonly held up as an example of the variety of saints for whom we give thanks: *'They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented.'* *'[S]eeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses...'* And yet, these are Old Testament figures, those holy men and women who lived out the Jewish faith, but who did not know Christ, and could not therefore have been Christians. They are therefore described as *'receiv[ing] not the promise.'*

That could sound very depressing, as though they were cut off from the faith; and yet, they are still described as 'witnesses'. But, *'God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.'* How on earth does that work though? Surely it is too late for them, however good they were?

I think the only answer must be that salvation is not something just to be worked out as individuals. We are not isolated men, women and children, floating around in the world, before being tested as to whether we have been good enough.

No, even though salvation through individual faith is how St Paul's version of Christianity, as seen through the eyes of Luther, is often portrayed, here we have a deeply communal idea of what it is to come to our place with God. And this is no novelty. For in Isaiah, *'the voice of weeping shall be no more heard in [Jerusalem], nor the voice of crying.'* And that dream of peace and justice is for the whole nation of Israel: *'They shall not labour in vain, nor bring forth for trouble; for they are the seed of the blessed Lord, and their offspring with them.'*

When we are told in Hebrews, *'let us run with patience the race that is set before us'*, it seems to me that that is addressed to the whole people of God, across the ages. And this time of year is for me I think primarily a reminder of this: that we work out together, patiently, what it is to be holy; to be children of God; to be good people, made in the very image of God.

We can be patient, because it is not down to us alone, either for our own sake or that of others. And that is why we tell stories of the saints. Our faith is a real, a concrete one. It is not a philosophy - it is a way of life, and one we live out together.

God came down to us in the form of a man, and our faith was passed down to us through men and women, known and unknown to us. And at All Saints and All Souls we try for a while to see as God sees, to see our species and our fellow Christians, through the lens of eternity. Celebrating those who have brought us here, as well as praying for those who have gone ahead of us, and seeing ourselves with them as children of the same heavenly Father, on pilgrimage until we join them. The new heaven and the new earth are not like the current heaven and earth, which will pass away. For the City of God knows no boundary between the dead and the living; we are all one in Christ through our baptism, those living and those departed.

See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; They will be his peoples, And God himself will be with them; He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; Mourning and crying and pain will be no more, For the former things have passed away.

And in our worship the boundary between earth and heaven lifts, the veil is drawn aside, as we join with all the angels and saints in heaven in singing together the great hymn of praise that *they* sing in the very presence of God,

HOLY, HOLY, HOLY, Lord God of Hosts, Heaven and earth are full of your glory. Amen