

The Church (2) - as a school for saints

(St Andrew's Church, St Andrews, All Saints Day, 1 November 1998)

{Readings: Daniel 7:1-3,15-18; Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 6:20-36}

All Saints' Day is the day we remember that all of us are saints. Well, I admit that's not quite the way it has usually been understood. But it could be understood that way. Paul in the passage we heard from Ephesians actually uses the phrase 'all the saints.' Most translations have that in verse 15. The REB (the translation we heard read) translates the phrase as 'all God's people,' and it has 'God's people' again in v 18, where the other versions have 'saints.' The reason REB avoids that word is, no doubt, because it has come to be used mostly for the rather special people we think of as Saints with a capital S, people who get to have St in front of their names: St Andrew and St Leonard and so on. By translating Paul's Greek as 'God's people' rather than 'saints,' the REB is trying to get at the real sense of the word as Paul uses it, but the result is perhaps to make it seem something rather ordinary. It may get closer to the impression Paul's words should have on us to keep the word saint but to notice that Paul is here using the word to describe all Christians. This isn't unusual in Paul. He does it all the time. Many of his letters begin with something like: 'to all the saints in Philippi' meaning 'to the whole church at Philippi.' If Paul were to write a letter to us, he would say: 'to all the saints at St Andrew's, St Andrews.'

Our reading from Daniel used another English phrase: 'the holy ones of the Most High.' That could also be translated 'the saints of the Most High' - and some older versions do translate it that way. 'Saints' means 'holy ones.' So instead of saying that we are all saints, I could have said that we are all holy. It doesn't sound any more credible, does it? But maybe it's our idea of what holiness or saintliness is that's the problem. Being holy doesn't primarily mean being good. It means: dedicated to God, set apart for God, consecrated by God. The emphasis is on something God has done for us: God has chosen us and consecrated us to be his people. We are people dedicated to God, not primarily because we dedicate ourselves to God, not because we can look back over the past week and decide that we have lived our lives in a dedicated way, but primarily because God has set us apart for himself. To be what Paul calls saints is an extraordinary privilege and an extraordinary responsibility. We belong to God and so we must live as people who belong to God.

I have just been reading Albert Camus' great novel *The Plague*. One of the central characters, Tarrou, who dedicates himself to relieving suffering in an apparently hopeless struggle against the plague that is ravaging the town, explains his motivation. From disillusioning experience in his life he has discovered how easy it is to collude with evil even when trying to change the world for the better. He has determined to do all he can to avoid that collusion with evil. He wants to dedicate himself solely to helping the victims of evil, as he does during the plague. He says: 'It comes to this: what interests me is learning to become a saint.' To which his friend objects, 'But you don't believe in God.' 'Exactly,' he says: 'Can one be a saint without God? - that's the problem, in fact the only problem, I'm up against today.'

Can one be a saint without God? No doubt it depends on how you define 'saint,' but in the biblical sense of the word saint, no. By definition one cannot be a saint without God. There are good people who do not believe in God. Of course there are. There are real people like Tarrou. Thank God there are. But a saint is not primarily a good person. A saint is, in the first place, someone dedicated to God, someone whose goodness, such as it is, flows from their dedication to God. Paul says something else about what it means to be saints: to be saints is to live to the praise of God's glory (v 12 and again in v 14). The saints' lives, individually and even more their life together as God's people, should be a place where God's glory can be seen, such that other people are drawn to recognize and to praise God. Of course, that is not because the saints draw attention to themselves: 'Look at us, aren't we wonderful, that's because we're dedicated to God.' It's because their lives actually are dedicated to God, which means not preoccupied with themselves, forgetful of self, attending to God and to others.

I'm saying 'they,' but of course I ought to be saying 'us.' We can't get away from the fact that this is what Paul is saying about all of us. What does it mean to live in such a way as to bring glory to God without bringing glory to ourselves? Part of the answer, it seems to me, though only part, may lie in gratitude to God. Remember last Sunday I said that the first thing that makes the church the church, makes us the church of Christ, is that we are sinners who know God's forgiveness. We start - and we are always starting again in this sense - by realizing that we owe everything to God. We start therefore with thankfulness, gratitude to God. If we really take to heart what God's love means for us, our whole lives will be suffused with gratitude to God, our lives will be lived as thank-offerings to God, expressions of our gratitude to God. Our lives will be dedicated to God, not so much out of duty as out of gratitude. And gratitude speaks of God without self-promotion. It doesn't say: 'Aren't we wonderful?' It says: 'God is amazing.' The message the church should be giving the world through the whole of our lives is: 'God is amazing.' But that happens not when we attend to the impression we are making, only when we attend to God.

That first chapter of Ephesians has a remarkable ending. If we are looking for the most mind-blowing things the New Testament says about what the church is, this may well be the winner. God, says Paul, raised Jesus from death and exalted Jesus above all creation, above all the angelic powers that rule in the heavenly places, up to where God's throne stands symbolically in the highest place imaginable, ruling over all things. Jesus Christ sits on the throne of God in the heights of heaven. We don't need to read that language literally, because Paul also says that Jesus Christ, like God, fills the universe: he is not in one place but in all places. But the image of height indicates supreme power and authority. Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth. And verse 22 says: 'God has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things *for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*' The church - that's us - has a cosmic role in the purpose of God.

The picture of the church as the body is used rather differently by Paul in various places where he employs it. Here the point is that the church is the body of which Christ is the head. Christ who is supreme over all things, head over all things, is also head of the church his body. He rules all things, but his relationship to the church is special and different. What can it mean that the church is Christ's body? Surely that it is the way he is to be seen on earth. He himself is hidden from the world, ruling in a way the world cannot see or acknowledge, but he makes himself known in the

world through his body, which is us. This is possible because - the other way the church is described here at the end of Ephesians 1 - the church is the fullness of the one who fills all in all. The church is the fullness of the Christ who is in all things. The church is the fullness of Christ's presence in the world.

Someone might perhaps draw the conclusion that the church, therefore, should have great power. If it is the body and the fullness of the one who rules all things from the cosmic throne of God in heaven, should not the church be ruling the world on his behalf? I mention that conclusion because it is not unknown in the history of the church. But that could not conceivably be the way in which Jesus Christ becomes recognizable on earth. The only way the church can be the fullness of Christ is by living on earth the way Jesus lived on earth: loving our enemies, blessing those who curse us, giving to those who beg from us, aligning ourselves not with the affluent and the powerful and the satisfied, but with the needy and the starving and those in distress. We heard that, of course, in our Gospel reading from Luke, one of those Gospel passages to which we may be tempted to respond: 'One would have to be a saint to do that.' Well, yes, precisely.

Maybe this is the point at which the saints with a capital S can help us. They are the people in whom we feel we can recognize Jesus. They are the people who show us that it really can happen. The Sermon on the Mount really can be lived. Jesus really can be reflected in the lives of others. God can be glorified in lives dedicated to him. I said 'the saints with a capital S,' but I don't mean only the well recognized ones. I mean also people we ourselves have probably known, ordinary people living the ordinary, obscure lives most of us live, but out of the ordinary in the way they have lived them. They are the people who help us believe it is possible. And the well-known saints, all down the centuries, those we can read about, also help and encourage us because they are all so different. The reflection of Jesus is recognizable in all of them, but in very different personalities, different cultures, different circumstances, different life tasks. Saintliness doesn't flatten out human diversity. It is not a sort of spiritual cloning. God is glorified in the very diversity of the lives that are lived for him. So 'But I'm not like mother Teresa' is neither a valid excuse nor a cause for discouragement.

However, finally, we should not think too individualistically about saintliness. It is the church, the body that is the fullness of Christ, not any one person. Jesus is reflected in the community of his brothers and sisters; God is glorified in his people. So with every Andrew, there's a Peter, a Mary Magdalene, a Bartholomew, a Matthew. With every Francis of Assisi, there's a Clare and a Giles and a lady Jacoba. With every name we know there are many others we don't, networks of mutual encouragement, working together, learning from each other, and so on. Usually, most of the time, we are not called to go it alone. As I suggested when I began, All Saints' Day can be the day we remember that all of us are saints.