

All Saints Sunday 2009

The word saint conjures up a mosaic of images drawn from art, literature, common language and experience. There is the saint as depicted in stained glass by Victorian artists such as Burne Jones - languid, rather beautiful, somewhat effete. Then, at the other extreme, there are the paintings to be found in many Italian Churches - Saint Sebastian, bloody and covered with arrows, St Catherine on the wheel, people being grotesquely mutilated. There is a very strong link here between Sainthood and martyrdom. Hm, probably better not to be a Saint as one will probably meet a violent end.

But not all our saints were martyred. There are stories of many who died peacefully in their beds, but who worked wonderful miracles, or who were the recipient of not so wonderful acts of God, as in the case of Frideswide, patron saint of Oxford, whose pursuer Algar was allegedly struck blind. Protection of virginity is a recurrent theme in many of these stories.

How odd that God only seems to have protected upper class ladies in this way, whereas the virginal daughters of peasants could be taken by the Lord of the Manor without such intervention. No beatification for them. Common sense tells us that this reflects the pre-occupation of the church with social status rather than telling us anything useful about what it is to be a saint.

Despite these somewhat negative images, there is a more positive strand that presents itself in everyday language.

Heard in its various forms as 'she was an absolute saint to put up with him like that.....' Gender and circumstances can be changed, but the idea of suffering out of a sense of commitment or duty being a saintly act is strong. In this definition one can be a saint with any faith or none. It is a totally secular use of the word. But again the implication commonly understood is that saintliness implies suffering for a cause, here the cause being marriage, family loyalty or a commitment in relationship.

The lectionary today takes up that theme but goes beyond it, pointing to the joy that follows after the grief.

Both the passage from Isaiah and the one from Revelation speak of an end to death and dying, and heaven as a place where God wipes away all tears from their eyes. This is the promise to those who have endured great ordeals for the sake of their faith. How easily we appropriate such readings and apply them to any and all suffering, but the text is quite unambiguous. The cause for which they have suffered is their faith.

Faith is central to our gospel reading. Lazarus is raised. Martha rejoices. And Jesus says to Martha: 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?'

The saints are not just those who died and have been canonised, but all the faithful departed, all those who had faith and are now in the arms of God.

So can one only be a saint, and here I am not necessarily talking about those whom the church has called saints with a capital S, if one has suffered for one's faith, and, if so, what does this mean if you live in a comfortable place where all religions are more or less tolerated? Are we in with a chance?

The first of the beatitudes states "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." If being poor in spirit is our route to heaven, then we must examine it closely, for it may inform us about sainthood.

What does it mean to be poor in spirit? It has been argued that it refers to those who willingly made themselves materially poor, but perhaps more likely it means those who, often in the face of

persecution or suffering, have put their trust in God those who have not relied upon their own strength, but who have seen their weaknesses clearly.

Is it possible both to love and trust God and to see our own weaknesses without some degree of suffering?

I think not. The suffering becomes an inevitable by-product, one that we need to accept willingly.

Christianity is so often seen as a comfort – atheists would call it a prop.

It is a comfort, but not comfortable. As Christians we have been given the knowledge that if we love each other and love God our lives will be blessed. Jesus, through his teaching and his stories ensures that we have all the information we need to understand God's priorities, and, just to make sure that we do not limit our goodwill to our friends he spells out for us God's love of the stranger, the outcast, the unlovable. But, if we act on this teaching we are bound to suffer because we will run counter to society. We will find ourselves campaigning for justice, for the poor, for drug addicts and prisoners. We will run into opposition from those we love. Run up against conflicts of interest. All the time we will be battling with our conscience as the Christian teaching opposes what is sensible, financially viable, safe, respectable even, and over and over again we will find that we fail..

We cannot even try to follow Christ without voluntarily accepting some degree of suffering and in the knowledge that we will never be able to live up to the ideal.

But maybe there is a loop hole. At least we can worship. We can be holy in that way even if the cross of action is too heavy for us.

We are made to worship God. It is our purpose. It is where we can find our true being. Sadly we don't make time for it and even when we do, how easily our minds are distracted, how tempting it is to become critical observers rather than participants. Worship demands that all our attention is focussed upon God. It demands that we stand in his brilliant light. Light that reveals all. Dare we allow ourselves to see ourselves as God sees us? If once we do that, we might risk shame and ridicule. Better perhaps to keep all pretences up, it is far less painful that way.

Perhaps then, to be a saint is to have eyes and ears that are open, open to the pain around us, ready to share in the suffering of others, open to the hearing of conscience, and an awareness of self that is painfully revealing. It is to stand in God's light so that all imperfections are shown up.

To be a Saint is not to have led a perfect life. But there will have been a willingness to be seen as imperfect if that is the route to perfection, trusting that God will do the rest, that he will purify us so that we become like him. It is indeed a form of martyrdom, for it is to suffer in the cause of love, love of God.

What is certain is that we cannot be remotely saintly when we pretend to be better than we are, and, if we are made for worship, one of the worst things we can do is pretend that we love God more than we do.

Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Or, to put it another way, it is only when we cry at our own failings, that God can wipe away our tears.

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