

Sermon on Matthew 5: 1-12

All Saints Day, 2014

Interpreters

You are not alone.

You need not be afraid.

You need not fear.

God is with us and we are with each other.

In our living, and in our dying, in his dying and rising, Jesus is Lord.

And for this we give thanks today and always.

This is what the church is; those who come together to look in the same direction, towards the crucified, risen Lord.

Those who seek to have our lives shaped by the 'new life' Jesus embodies.

Those who live hopefully, leaning forward, into the time God restores all creation, yet with our feet firmly planted in the world of the here and now.

We are not alone, we need not be afraid.

God is with us.

And in our common sharing together, we are with each other.

The company of Christians across time and space.

What the hymnwriter calls, the 'blest communion', 'fellowship divine'.

We say this kind of thing a lot in church, and with good reason.

If there's one idea the world of today has succeeded in promoting it's that we are each entitled to be masters of our own destiny.

I think, therefore I am. I choose, I go, I live, I decide.

My responsibility is to myself, no-one else.

I'll shape my own life the way I want to thanks very much, no external help required.

Taken to its logical extreme, imagine what a lonely life that would be?

My life, my way, without necessarily any reference to the needs or graces of others or the world around?

From the beginning the church has worked from a very different premise.

We are each persons, made in God's image and likeness, loved and treasured by God, the church has wanted to say, worthy of dignity and respect, and called to live fruitful and gracious lives, in the light of Jesus' self-giving act of love.

We are not alone, in the first place, because our lives are not our own.

They belong to someone else.

We belong to someone else.

We belong to God and derivatively, then, to each other.

Not in an ownership kind of way – belonging doesn't equal possession.

No, we belong to God like a child belongs to a parent, like a farmer belongs to her farm, like a musician belongs to his music.

Belonging to God means we are at home in God.

In God we find our rest, our reassurance, our protection, our comfort, our forgiveness – perhaps most importantly it is in God that we find our true identity and purpose.

We belong to God.

God is our final interpreter.

No day in the Christian year captures this deep truth of the faith more poignantly than All Saints day.

Today we remember that our belonging to God means we also belong to each other.

We are a part of the great chorus of saints whose company transcends the line between heaven and earth.

We on earth, who still struggle by faith, are joined eternally with those who have gone before us into the fullness of the presence of God, who now live by sight.

And the eternity that they now know completely, is still rummaging around in us and among us as we continue to follow Christ here on earth, in this messy, contradictory, and difficult world, of which we remain a part.

There's a wonderful quote whose author I've failed to track down who wrote, "The thing Christians have in common is not their humanity, but the Church."

How true it is!

The church which extends into God's eternity, which the book of Revelation pictures as a bride descending from out of the heights, encircles us today.

We say in the creed that we 'believe in the communion of saints'.

And here today we celebrate all the saints of heaven and earth who still gather around us.

We've heard from Ray and Bruce of two saints of the faith who are still very much a part of us, and we of them.

Saints, by definition, are holy people.

St Paul on a couple of occasions addresses his letters to 'the saints' in a particular place, meaning the company of Christians.

Holiness is something belonging to all Christians in greater or lesser degrees, yet, as Ben Myers suggests, when it is particularly intensified in a particular person, or condensed, we have before us a saint.

Perhaps a parent who has handed their faith onto you, as we've heard today.

Perhaps a friend who has walked with you through hard times and been there at the other end of the long tunnel?

Perhaps a spouse who knew the best and worst of you, but loved you all the same?

Perhaps someone you never imagined, through whom you felt just that little bit closer to God.

We had a friend, indeed a dear friend, at a former church, someone who fitted the bill for a saint well, probably the most patient and gracious person I've ever known, but by no means a push over.

She used to have this very gentle way of rebuking you in conversation if she felt what you were saying was drifting too close to gossip.

She would just quietly say 'anyway', and at that word you knew things were on the edge and you'd do well to pull back a bit.

It was her way of honouring God in that context, and we all knew it.

She was one of the saints... we saw God through her.

Holiness is not measured in acts of observable piety.

You don't become a saint by praying every day in the church for an hour.

Though saints are certainly people of prayer.

Nor is it found in positions held in church hierarchy.

Being at theological college for four years doesn't make one a saint... sometimes, dare I say it, it can be the opposite??

It is more like in the Orthodox understanding, saints are people through whom the light of God most brightly shines.

Saints are like windows into the glory of God for those with eyes to see.

True holiness is developed as the light shining through the window becomes brighter and brighter, warmer and warmer.

Saints are not perfect people, indeed oftentimes it has been those most acutely aware of their imperfections, the church has regarded in this way.

Yet somehow saints are those through whom the divine light washes over everyone, and illuminates the presence of God.

Thus holiness involves at the same time a certain kind of forgetting and a certain kind of remembering.

There is a forgetting of the selfish desires of one's own will, yet a remembering of the God-given gift of life itself.

And a willingness to give all of oneself in holy service.

There is a forgetting of the will to control or to dictate, yet a remembering that God is constantly in our midst dragging us out of our timidity.

There is a forgetting of the ways of this world, yet a remembering to love the people of the world, as God does, and seek to care for their material needs.

There is a distinct lack of self-consciousness, of self contrivance in holiness.

We don't create faith for ourselves, it is a gift, and one we pray will be strengthened over our lifetime.

Blessed are the meek, Jesus says, but if you believe yourself meek, you're probably not.

Blessed are those who search for righteousness, but if you believe you are one of the few who search for righteousness, you probably don't.

Blessed are the pure in heart, but if you believe this of yourself, chances are you're not as pure as you think.

It is not those we call the saints of the church who designate themselves thus.

We only come to know who they are as we see them, as we see the light of God refracting through them, and as we see that their lives are being interpreted by God with a certain beauty which is unmistakable, which illuminates us as well...

And it is here that we locate perhaps one of the key reasons Christians can never really be Christians by themselves: why we need each other, why we take strength from each other, why what we have in common is the church.

Everything we do is in company.

We read the Bible together and in the company of those who have read it before us.

We worship in company with each other, with Christians across the world, and with the great communion of saints in heaven worshipping along with us.

We serve and share in company, recognising that we each have a role to play in the Body of Christ, but that if we are a foot we cannot also be a hand.

But especially today on All Saints Day, we recognise that we are each other's interpreters.

Part of being in the church means recognising the light of God in each other, such that our common life is illuminated.

We are each other's interpreters.

Our lives, and our faith, is placed in each other's hands for protection and safe keeping and interpretation.

We don't interpret ourselves, all the self-serving motives we each have would no doubt creep in.

No, this is a kind of entrusting that we will guard each other's lives in God faithfully and look for the light of Christ which shines through.

We see this done most intentionally at funerals of course.

The literal meaning of the word 'eulogy' is a 'good word' or a 'word of praise'.

Set within a Christian context, and as one beloved of Christ is sung home into the company of saints in heaven, a eulogy is a word of praise, not of the person, but of the God to whom they belonged and have returned.

We are each other's interpreters in the light of God's working and will for our lives and for the world, a great and sacred task.

Sometimes, as St Paul noted a number of times, this actually requires us to challenge and even rebuke each other.

Sometimes it will mean encouragement, grace, patience, and of course over everything, love.

We are not alone. We need not fear, we need not be afraid.

The great truth which undergirds our interpreting, our common life together, the blest communion of the company of saints, is that God is the grand interpreter of all we are and all there is.

This is what our faith affirms.

As we are born, as we begin the Christian journey and are welcomed into the church at baptism (a birth and death of another kind rolled up in one), as we serve and share over a lifetime, and as we die into God's loving arms, the final word about who we are belongs to God.

As we know, God's final Word, for all of us, is Jesus.

Jesus is God's interpretation of who we are as persons, as the church, and as the company of saints across time and space.

Our interpretations of each other only make sense in the light of God's final interpretation of everything in Christ.

And what does this sound like in plain language?

In Jesus, God says to us, 'you are my beloved', and forever shall be, in this life and in the life to come.

This is God's interpretation.

And on All Saints' Sunday, we give thanks to God for his beloved who have gone before us, lighted the path we now tread, and share in our joy today that Christ is risen, and sin and death are forever defeated.

We are not alone, we need not fear, we need not be afraid, for we are not our own, we belong to God, and to each other.

O Blest communion, fellowship divine, we feebly struggle, they in glory shine, yet all are one in Thee, for all are Thine.

Alleluia!