

ALL SAINTS' DAY – 1st NOVEMBER, 2010

All Saints' Day is one of the great festival days of the Church's year, when we honour all those who have reached their true destination after completing their lives on earth. Think about the words and the tune of the hymn we have just sung, "For All the Saints", they are among the most inspiring of all the Church's hymns, but who were these Saints? We learn this from the first verse:

"For all the Saints who from their labours rest, who thee by faith before the world confessed."

Who thee by faith before the world confessed – and what was their confession, what was it by words and deeds they confessed to the world?

"Thy name, O Jesu, be forever blessed."

And then in the second last verse we hear of the culmination of all their struggles:

*"But lo! there breaks a yet more glorious day;
The Saints triumphant rise in bright array:
As the King of Glory passes on his way."*

But who were these Saints about whom we sing? Technically, a Saint is any Christian, for in the early Church all men and women were referred to as the Saints. But many people have an image of Saints as people who have never committed a sin in their lives, people always shining with virtue, humble but strong-willed, pure, never losing their patience, people who never thought of themselves, but only of God and other people.

But this is a nonsense for it suggests that they were Saints from cradle to grave. We only have to think of some of the best known Saints to realise how wrong this conception is. Take Peter, who promised Jesus that "I will never leave you", but after Jesus was arrested Peter, so scared was he for his own life, denied three times that he had ever known Him. Think of Paul, one of the leaders who persecuted Jesus' disciples after His crucifixion, which he admits to in his writings, even admitting to being a witness to the stoning to death of Stephen, the first Christian to die for the faith.

So we see that they were not born as Saints, but became Saints. All Saints are people whose lives have undergone a change of heart, which we call conversion, a change of heart which resulted in a change of life. We see it most clearly in the lives of the best-known Saints, such as Peter and Paul, and then later Saints, such as St Francis of Assisi, Augustine of Hippo, and Ignatius of Loyola.

And if we also think about modern day Saints, the quality which most stands out is their immense dignity, which can only come from their self-awareness that they are being the real people whom God intended them to be. With each of them the "real me" has emerged instead of remaining hidden under layers of self-pretence, the false image which so many of us choose to project to others, rather than the "real me".

The Saints are people who have let all that hidden goodness and beauty which God has placed in each of us come to light. They were, they are, people who believed in the good news of a creator God who loves the people he has created unconditionally, and began to return his love. In the process they found their lives changed, not overnight, but by a gradual process of growth which didn't rule out future stumbling and failure, a process which, for many like Peter, took a long time, unlike Paul whose conversion experience happened in a blinding flash of light on the road to Damascus. Would that we were all so lucky, but for most of us the road to Sainthood is slow and hard, and filled with much failure and guilt, as we, like Peter, deny our Lord over and over again.

Another fallacy about Saints is that they are all heroes, but this is not so, because for every true Saint whom we applaud, such as St Peter, or in modern times, Mother Teresa, there are countless others, true Saints whose lives pass unsung and unhonoured, known only to God. But we have all known some of them, for God sees to it that Saints live among us all the time. The daily life of these people is often made up of great sacrifices and acts of quiet heroism, parents of a severely handicapped child, for example – and I'm sure that most of you could think of a case within our own congregation here at St John's. Or people who do obscure and routine jobs, quiet, gentle people for whom the welfare of their neighbour is as important as their own, people who give God first place in their lives.

Saints are witnesses to the love of God and there is no higher vocation in all the world than that, it is the vocation to which we are all called. In honouring the hidden, silent Saints let us be inspired by them to follow in our own humble way, as beautifully described once of a sexton at a well-known English cathedral, of whom it was said: "At a particular moment every day his love of God becomes a love of lighting the candles." Most of the Saints of this world are simple people who, like the sexton, let their candles of faith shine, and in so doing, bring light, warmth and hope to those around them.

—Fr John Spooner