

SERMON: ALL SAINTS DAY Luke 6.20-31

Dear Father, we give you the thanks for all the saints before us who gave witness to your Son through their faith-filled words and deeds. By your grace may we follow their example, sharing your love and truth with all whom we meet. Amen

Today is the celebration of All Saints Day and so I'm going to address four questions. First, when did Christians first start commemorating the Feast Day of All Saints?

Second, who are these saints that we commemorate?

Third, why do we commemorate them?

And Fourth, what are all Christ's saints called to do?

When?

So starting with When, does anyone know roughly how long ago we started celebrating All Saints Day?

The feast dates back to the early Church, when communities would gather and celebrate the anniversary of a disciple's martyrdom for their faith. During the persecution under the Emperor Diocletian at the beginning of the fourth century the number of martyrs became so great that a separate day could not be assigned to each saint, so the Church established a common feast day for all the martyrs. The choice of day may have been also intended to co-opt the Ancient Roman 'Feast of the Lamures,' which Romans used to placate what they believed to be the restless spirits of the dead. The liturgical celebration on the day before the feast became known as hallowed evening or as we know it with the Scottish abbreviation of Hallowe'en.

Who?

Turning to the "Who", in the New Testament, the Greek word "hagios" is used to denote saints. There are two key points to be learnt from this term. First it is applied to **all believers** in Christ. The Apostle Paul frequently addresses his letters to the "saints" in various cities, indicating that all Christians are considered saints by virtue of their faith. For instance, Paul writes at the beginning of the letter to the Ephesians, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus."

Second, it emphasizes the status of all believers as those who are sanctified and called to live in holiness. This holiness is not achieved through human effort but is a result of the transformative work of the Holy Spirit in each believer's life.

Why?

We move to the third question: Why do we commemorate All Saints Day?

Archbishop Kay Goldsworthy has given a notable answer to this question: *On All Saints' Day we pause and take time to give thanks to God for those who have gone before us and in whose lives the love, mercy and grace of God's son Jesus shone so brightly. Some of God's saints – the set apart, the holy, the sanctified – have influenced the course of history, bringing to light new ways in which God's love in their time could be understood and lived out. Attempting a list would be as long as 2100 years, but we can all point out one of the saints whose life has influenced our own.*

All Saints' Day reminds people of the strength and goodness shown by saints, past and present and encourages us to instill those values within our daily lives. This leads us to the last question: what are we, as Christ's saints, called to do?

What are we saints called to do? The Sermon on the Mount: Luke 6.20-31

Our gospel message from Luke 6 verses 20 to 31 sheds much light on this issue. Jesus' full sermon actually goes beyond our text right up to verse 49. When taken together, I suggest that the overall message is Jesus' call to all his saints to love as He loves.

Verse 20 opens with "*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*" This blessing is very personally directed to his close disciples: Blessed are YOU.....for YOURS is the kingdom. He also uses the Greek present tense to convey that this blessing already exists. They have chosen to give up their worldly possessions and follow Jesus. The other three blessings listed suggest a future application. This reflects a common gospel theme that God's kingdom is both here now for those who seek Jesus and yet to come when He returns. There is the real-life tension between striving to live the kingdom now and needing our Lord to return before it is complete.

Although Luke is literally talking about material things, most theologians agree that he implicitly captures both aspects of our life: material and spiritual. And that's the truth of it, isn't it? Material possessions alone do not tell a person's state of poorness. It is our relationship with Jesus that determines our true wealth as we follow Him and share in God's kingdom.

The second and third blessings in verse 21 are: "*Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.*" As we strive to be like Jesus, each saint may well experience physical or spiritual hunger, as well as moments of deep sadness. Yet we are filled with the hope that in those challenging times our faith gives us comfort. We are also certain, that a reward of great fulfilment and laughter awaits us all in heaven.

The fourth blessing in verses 22 and 23 is two pronged. First it warns followers of Christ to expect to be hated, excluded, reviled and defamed. Today the largest group of people persecuted across the world for their faith are our

brothers and sisters in Christ. While we don't face that yet, the current political climate reveals there are many people in our own community and across the world who have no problem hating, excluding, reviling and defaming anyone who does not see the world the way they see it.

The second prong is a direction for us to rejoice whenever we may face such persecution. Once again we are called to turn our heart to the promise of a joyous life eternal, no matter what our personal circumstances.

Now Luke moves to the woes that directly parallel the blessings. Together the blessings and woes put in stark relief the contrast between the kingdom of God and the present world order; the way God meant the world to be and the way we actually live it.

The first woe in verse 24 declares: "*But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.*" This is a theme that has come up a fair bit in recent Sundays. (As Barry mentioned last week) It's all about our priorities. Jesus is not condemning every rich person but he is warning that anyone who places their wealth above their relationship with him has got it seriously wrong.

Inherent in this warning is, I believe, a strong critique of what some Christians call the "Prosperity Gospel". God does not guarantee us wealth in this world but he does long for a rich relationship with each one of us. May Jesus' call for all saints to grow in our relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit always remain at the centre of our ministry.

Verse 25 lists the opposite of the two blessings of hunger and sadness. The woes of those who are full and those who are laughing reflect the gluttony and derisive attitude that so easily follows great wealth.

The final woe in verse 26 contrasts with the fourth blessing, the warning to prepare for personal attack because of your faith in Jesus. Here we are reminded that speaking God's truth even when it is not popular may be required of Jesus' disciples. It is a challenge to each of us to not seek to curry personal favour by compromising the standards Jesus has set.

I must admit that as I reflected on these instructions I couldn't help but cry out: "Please God, help me!" And my reaction only increased when I came to verses 27 to 31. Perhaps more than any other lessons taught to us directly by Jesus, these ones are the most counter-intuitive. Jesus begins in verse 27 by making it clear that he is directing his lesson to those "who listen"; to those who are prepared to see things differently and as a result become his disciple. And the essence of that discipleship is immediately expressed as: To Love your Enemies. Not with just any sort of love, mind you, but with God's gracious, unconditional love.

The rest of this text tells us how we are to live this love. They seem almost impossible tasks that are set before us. We could argue that Jesus was using the

literary technique of hyperbole to make an impact on his audience of the day; he was exaggerating, so doesn't really expect us to continue to do what he said so long ago. However most of the imperative verbs he uses, are in the Greek present tense. This implies that the actions commanded by Jesus were not one off activities but rather habitual behaviour expected of his followers, both then and now.

So what are these actions we saints are meant to follow? In verses 27 and 28 we are given four principles: to love your enemies, to do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you and pray for those who abuse you. These are followed in verses 29 to 30 by four ways believers should behave when physically attacked or the victim of extortion or coercion, or being asked to support someone, or when being robbed. The normal response to these sorts of offenses is to protect ourselves then retaliate, but Jesus tells us to do the opposite: we must give everything we've got and expose ourselves to evil and injustice. Surrendering not only your "coat" but also your "shirt" is to deliberately choose to become naked and seemingly defenceless in the face of attack.

None of this is to suggest that we should ever place ourselves in or stay in harm's way. Indeed, we saints have an obligation to stand against unethical behaviour of any kind but we are asked to do so not out of personal anger, but rather from a deep trust in God's loving power. Verses 31 to 38 tell us that the Golden Rule of "*Do to others as you would have them do to you*", sets a standard of love that goes way beyond the rational notion of giving to others in the knowledge or hope that you will get back something of equal value. It reminds us that all things come from God; that his love is graciously abundant to everyone, including the ungrateful and the wicked. It reminds us that we are called to imitate that grace in all our relationships. We are called to be kind, merciful, non-judgemental and above all, forgiving. We will often not achieve these ethical goals but we can at least, always **try** to. And as we strive to live by these standards we can be empowered by the example given to us by so many saints who have gone before us.

Let me finish in prayer. Dear Father, we pray for all your saints today. May those facing persecution be protected by your Holy Spirit and strengthened by your promise of eternal life. And may all saints in every land be given the grace to live out their calling to give witness to the love of Jesus. Amen.