

(Wisdom 3:1-9; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44)

Today, All Saints Sunday, we give thanks for the countless people down the ages whose lives serve as an inspiration to us as we seek to grow in holiness.

Of course, most individual members of this ‘cloud of witnesses’ gone before us will never be known to us. It is only the minority who are named and who have a special day in the Christian calendar. So today is the special day on which to celebrate the lives of All (the other) Saints, the ‘sparks among the stubble’ who lit God’s fire in the world. By contrast, there are some whose memory burns brightly but only in local circles, as any tour of Cornwall or East Anglia will remind us! There we find a host of intriguing names such as St Austell, St Felix, St Neot, St Petroc, and St Wynfryth!

And here we have our own local ‘sparks’. The reredos in this church, dating back to 1947, is a celebration of some of the northern saints, including Paulinus, Cuthbert, Hilda, Wilfred, Agatha, and Aidan.

Because we know their names, we know something also of their stories, and in each case we can learn from their examples of holiness.

Now our readings today all speak of the Christian hope – the ‘hope of immortality’ as expressed in our first reading and espoused by *all* the saints, named and unnamed (along with those who we remember in All Souls-tide, those whose had a direct influence on our coming to Christ). Our second reading offers the vision of the ‘home of God [being] among mortals’, whilst our gospel reading points to the contrast between the raising of Lazarus and the resurrection of Christ. Lazarus would die again; Christ conquered death and entered in to glory.

The theologian Tom Wright in his book ‘Surprised by Hope’ explores the Christian hope in enlightening detail. For example, he considers the implications of taking seriously the message of our second reading from Revelation, in which ‘the new Jerusalem [will come] down out of heaven from God’. So with the COP26 climate summit commencing today, we are invited to recognise the critical importance of safeguarding the earth both for future generations and future events. In Tom Wright’s reading of scripture, when we say in the Creed ‘we believe in the resurrection of the body’ that should be precisely what we mean.

In exploring the nature of the resurrection body, Tom Wright says this: ‘Our ultimate destination is not ‘going to heaven when you die’, but being bodily raised into the transformed glorious likeness of Jesus Christ. Thus, if we do speak of ‘going to heaven when we die’ we should be clear that this represents the first of a two-stage process. Resurrection is not ‘life after death’, it is life *after* ‘life after death’.’

He is saying that the ‘general resurrection’ will not take place until the ‘last day’. In the meantime, he argues, the Christian departed are in a state – not of ‘purgatory’ – but of what he calls ‘restful happiness’. The body is ‘asleep’ whilst the essence of the

‘real person’ continues. Here, ‘the dead are held firmly within the conscious love of God, and the conscious presence of Christ, while they await the resurrection’. He is making a distinction between ‘heaven’ and ‘Paradise’.

This leads him to suggest that in heaven there can be no categories as Christians await the resurrection. He says that there is no reason to think that Peter or Paul (that’s saint, not curate!), Aidan or Cuthbert, can be any more ‘advanced’ than anyone else. ‘If we are to be true to our ‘foundation charter’’ he writes, ‘we must say that *all* Christians, living and departed, are to be thought of as ‘saints’; and so *all* Christians who have died are to be thought of, and treated, as such’. Remember, in the early Christian writings, Christians are referred to as ‘saints’.

And note that Tom Wright is no ‘universalist’. For him, entering that state of ‘restful happiness’ in the conscious presence of Christ would be meaningless to anyone who has not turned to Christ.

‘Do to others as you would have them do to you.’ That simple moral code is, of course, not the sole preserve of Christians; people of all faiths, and none, instinctively subscribe to it as a ‘natural law’. Indeed, it is often referred to as the ‘Golden Rule’.

In Matthew’s gospel Jesus commends the Golden Rule in the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ – which begins with the Beatitudes. Jesus opens these by saying, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven’. That phrase ‘poor in spirit’ refers to anyone who, to paraphrase the philosopher Pascal, is aware of a ‘God-shaped hole’ within. In other words, Jesus is saying ‘Happy are those who know their need of God...’

Contrast this with the ‘Sunday Assembly’ – a church without God! The vision of the Sunday Assembly is to offer ‘the best of church but without God’. There are songs and readings, a talk, and time for reflection. Naturally, in normal times, there is also coffee afterwards. Since its launch eight years ago in London the Sunday Assembly has experienced phenomenal growth around the world.

One of its founders said: ‘People want to think about improving themselves and helping other people and doing all of that in a community where you forge strong relationships’. He also stated that the Sunday Assembly’s Vision is ‘to live better, help often and wonder more’. But there is no God!

For members of the Sunday Assembly there would seem to be a ‘Church-shaped hole’, with the need for relationship being at the heart of the matter. We would want to say that what is distinctive about the Christian Church is Christ and that therefore it is our relationship with him which is at the heart of the matter. After all, as baptised members of his Church we are all brothers and sisters ‘in Christ’ – and therefore fellow members of the ‘Communion of Saints’.

So if people are being attracted to a ‘church without God’ then perhaps we as members of the ‘Church *with* God’ should be asking ourselves how much difference our relationships with, and in, Christ actually make to our lives; as well as our deaths.

The great spiritual writer Michael Mayne observed that ‘We would not be seeking to love God better unless we had in some way been grasped by him; unless he were already within our hearts and minds, having planted in us an intuitive desire to explore and become intimate with the very source of our being. Sometimes we are lucky enough to meet someone who has spent a lifetime in the quest for God. Often it is a monk or nun, and their faces are so unmistakably beautiful that we are compelled to ask not so much ‘What have you been doing all these years?’, but who have you been with?’.

It is this very attractiveness that is a feature in the lives of all the saints we commemorate today. And it is their example of ‘knowing their need of God’ which we seek to follow. At St Mary’s, our Vision is a little more ambitious than ‘to live better, help often and wonder more’, laudable though that is; it is ‘to be a people and a place where love works’. As brothers and sisters in Christ may that vision be realised as we each grow in relationship with him who said ‘I am the resurrection and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me’.

Thanks be to God. Amen.