

All Saints Day (Matthew 5. 1-12)
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The concept of 'sainthood' has a mixed history in the Christian tradition. In Roman Catholic devotional practice, saints have been venerated enthusiastically if not, at times, extravagantly. By way of statues and paintings, sometimes improbable stories and collections of relics, the saints have been commended to the faithful as edifying examples of courage, chastity, obedience, long-suffering, vision, service and many other virtues. There is much that is helpful and strengthening about this practice of honouring the saints – but it is vulnerable to a certain spiritual 'over-heating', and even manipulation by the church hierarchy. The politicisation of the process of canonisation is often remarked, and the elevation of some to such spiritual heights may have the effect of spiritually disempowering and ecclesiastically suppressing, the many.

In reaction to some of these excesses and dangers, the Protestant tradition has tended to emphasise something like the sainthood of all believers. I have sat through many an All Saints Day sermon which talks about how all the faithful, all of us, and not just the famous ones, are saints or at least proto-saints. And there is something helpful and strengthening here too, in this insistence that sanctification, holiness, is the vocation of all Christian people – although a danger is that when all are said to be saints, then none are. We are left with no very strong understanding of what sanctity really is.

I believe that the concept of sanctity, or sainthood is essential for religious communities – and it's significant, don't you think, that every great spiritual tradition recognises some as saints? It's not that we need to put some people on pedestals – as if they the celebrities of the spiritual life and will somehow 'do it' for the rest of

us. Rather, we need the concept of 'sainthood', and the capacity to recognise saints, because God and God's action can only be known to us through the way God's presence impacts particular lives. James Alison suggests an analogy with the way a meteor striking the earth leaves a crater. We cannot see the meteor – but we see something of its nature, how big it was, how fast it was going, by exploring its impact on the ground. Saints are those people who offer themselves with peculiar openness and receptivity to be struck, impacted by God's presence – and we learn something of God, we receive something of God, by what happens in and through their human lives. This is the vocation of us all. And the saints give us glimpses of what this means in practice.

St Paul knew, for example, that growing in holiness and so in our capacity to communicate God's love and healing, is not simply a matter of practising certain moral virtues or believing certain truths. It involves the whole texture of our lives, imitating the pattern first of Christ's life and then of the lives of others who've let God shape them in this radical way. This doesn't mean merely copying, replicating the external form of saintly role models. It is somehow catching onto the rhythm of God's life seen in them. 'Like this', Jesus says. The kingdom of heaven is like this – like yeast that leavens a whole loaf, like a treasure buried in a field, like a king preparing a wedding banquet, like a landholder who planted a vineyard.

In her poem, 'Getting it across', the poet Ursula Fanthorpe imagines Jesus frustrated about the failure of the disciples to catch this rhythm, to get the hang of it:

They know my unknowable parables as well
as each other's shaggy dog stories.
I say! I say! I say! There was this Samaritan,
this Philistine and this Roman ... or
What did the high priest say
to the belly dancer? All they need
is the cue for laughs ...

'I envy Moses', she has Jesus say, 'who could choose the diuturnity of stone' or the prophets who, 'however luckless ... inscribed on wood, papyrus, walls, their jaundiced oracles. I alone must write on flesh'. 'I alone must write on flesh'. A saint is someone who has allowed Christ to 'write on her flesh' or, as Fanthorpe puts it, 'to tattoo God on [his] makeshift [life]'.

How do we give *ourselves* to this invitation, this call? At the heart of it, of course, is the way of the Cross – the willingness to be handed over, clinging to no security of our own, letting ourselves be formed, shaped and reshaped by openness and responsiveness to the impact of God. When Jesus draws his disciples aside early in his ministry, to teach them the way of blessedness, of sanctity, he says: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'.

Being 'poor in spirit', opening ourselves deeply to God and inviting purification and healing, is always a piecemeal matter. We cling to the rags of our pride and self-protection; we are afraid of being led to the Cross and we are perhaps even more afraid of being loved into abundant life. Yet this willingness to be vulnerable before God is the only way of growing into the 'full stature of Christ', offering ourselves as Christ did, to enflesh God on earth.

This means that sanctification is never a possession, never something we control or own. It is the fruit of God's own Spirit growing in ways we do not fully understand in lives continuously being handed over to God in trust and truthfulness. And the Spirit grows gifts differently in different lives. The saints are utterly individual. Yet despite this diversity, they have underlying qualities in common. We see in them an authenticity, peace and contentment born of wounds and personal dividedness integrated; there is freedom, patience and non-anxiousness in the face of uncertainty; and there is a lightness, confidence and joy born of faith fully inhabited and hope become tangible. The outworking of this, as New Testament knew so well, is love. Sanctification shows itself finally in our love for God, for one another and ourselves. On this All Saints Day, we give thanks for those who have

given themselves to this adventure of the Spirit, and we pray for grace and courage, that we too may offer ourselves to communicate God through our makeshift lives.