

For All the Saints (Ephesians 1. 15-23)

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‘Why are the walls of Russian churches so crowded and cluttered with icons of the saints? It is not because the Orthodox love pictures, but because they love *light*. For the icons are not art works, but windows; they are the small openings through which the light of God bursts in upon the gathered church. It is here, in the lives and prayers of the saints, that the church is irradiated and sustained. The saints have lived in such proximity to God that they become a kind of intercession for the rest of us. God looks at us through them; they are God’s windows’.¹ These words are written by Australian theologian Ben Myers. I find profoundly helpful that image of the saints as living in such proximity to God, so radically open to the power of God, that they actually shed something of God’s own light. Like magnifying glasses exposed to the sun, they intensify God’s self-communication.

This vision of sanctity has nothing to do with pallid, moralistic, goody two-shoes type behaviour. It may not even be connected to ‘wholeness’ as we usually imagine it. In fact sometimes, Myers writes, the intensity of God’s impact can ‘knock a life off balance’, such that saints are not necessarily fully integrated or well-rounded people. How could they be when they’re so intensely exposed to the ‘strange world of God’? The Orthodox love for the ‘holy fool’ reflects this understanding – think of the strange and eccentric lives of people like Francis of Assisi, the desert monastics, Mary Mackillop and Mr Curly in the imagination of Michael Leunig. The perspective of the saint’s life can seem skewed, Myers says, ‘but only because it is really *our* world that is bent out of shape. In the weirdness of the saint, we are glimpsing the geometry of another world’.²

¹ Benjamin Myers, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), p.74.

² Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, p.77.

Today we celebrate all the saints. We remember those holy lives that have drawn most deeply from the real wellspring of life, and so helped to make visible the light and life of eternity. We look to their example as we too seek to become more fully real and true, more fully exposed to the power of God at work in us to transform. How do they do it? What is the pattern of holy living? And how does it matter for the life of the world?

For St Paul writing to the early Christian community at Ephesus, the whole point of Christian life is to form saints. He commends the Ephesians for ‘your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints’, and goes on to pray that they may grow into sanctity themselves. ‘I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him’ (Eph.1.17). Notice that ‘knowing God’ here means not ‘knowing about’ but coming deeper into relationship, becoming intimate with. For as intimacy grows with God, Paul believes, ‘the eyes of the human heart are enlightened’ (Eph.1.18). Our whole way of knowing expands which means so does our capacity to perceive the deeper dimensions of reality. Thus we may come to know ‘what is the hope to which God has called you, what are the riches of God’s glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of God’s power for us who believe’ (Eph.1.19). In other words, there’s something here about holy lives participating in the very life and wisdom and power of God – once again it suggests an image of lives transparent to a deeper reality that shines through, transfigures and enlivens all who are truly open to it.

And this tells us something about how saints are formed. It requires a kind of self-emptying, self-displacement – in Greek the word is *kenosis*. Making themselves nothing, saints make room for God, writes Myers.³ But we must be careful not to misunderstand this *kenosis* as servile self-abnegation. Rowan Williams insists that this ‘yielding of the self to God’ does not mean the self’s erasure, but its intensification. He makes an analogy with a musician’s performance: ‘the musician

³ Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, p.75.

becomes more gloriously herself as she allows her own ego to become completely transparent to the mind and intention of the composer. The performer's kenosis is not emptiness but true fullness, a "saturation" in which one self lovingly yields to another. In this act of willed displacement, the self becomes more acute, more distinctive, yet also more expansive and elastic and capable of giving'.⁴ And maybe you know this experience for yourself – a sense that the more we yield ourselves to God, the more we seem to become ourselves.

Saints are strong, they can be feisty. And around them, things happen. Sometimes obviously, sometimes quietly and hiddenly, possibilities expand because here is a place in the world where God is allowed to break through with (so to speak) less interference, less static. 'A holy person', writes Williams, 'makes you see things in yourself and around you that you had not seen before; that is to say, enlarges the world rather than shrinking it. This is why we say of Jesus that he is the "most Holy One", because he above all changes the landscape, casts a new light on everything'.⁵ He is thus, as our passage expresses it, 'above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come' (Eph.1.21), for he is the perfect expression of a human life saturated with the life of God.

But it's important to notice what this doesn't mean. From a Christian perspective, the light Jesus sheds and the possibilities that arise around him reveal the true nature of reality, the nature of God. On this understanding, a life that had a totally contrary impact – for example, a person who shrank the lives of others, brought misery rather than joy, exploited rather than liberated the vulnerable – could never be considered a saint. But there's nothing here to suggest that becoming a saint, becoming more completely transparent to the life of God, is limited to one tradition or religious culture. Wherever a life makes place for God to happen in the world and sheds something of God's truth and light, we can speak of holiness, sanctity. Which means that on this feast of all the saints, we can reverence and give

⁴ Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, pp.75-76.

⁵ Rowan Williams, *Being Disciples: Essentials of Christian Life* (London: SPCK, 2016), p.52.

thanks for those of every tradition, time and place who have shown us more of the fullness of being, and helped us to imagine we could come to embody this fullness ourselves.

Indeed, Belden Lane, in his wonderful book *The Great Conversation*, suggests that we need not even limit our concept of sanctity to the human world. Lane is, he says, in love with a Cottonwood tree who lives in his local park. Lane calls him 'Grandfather' and writes of him that he 'is a member of the poplar family; his leaves flutter like those of aspen trees in the slightest breeze'.⁶ To the Lakota people cottonwood trees are sacred. 'They pray as their leaves move in the wind'. Lane speaks of Grandfather as his spiritual teacher. 'For more than twenty years I've entrusted this tree with the care of my soul. In the past six years we've assumed a more formal apprenticeship, exploring deeper ways of communicating with each other'.⁷ Lane's account of this apprenticeship is moving and realistic. It isn't 'a paranormal exercise in altered states of consciousness'. Lane says he's never heard Grandfather speak 'with a deep, gravelly voice. I just spend a lot of time in silence with him', leaning into his hollow and practising a contemplative listening that sounds a lot like what Australian First Nations elder, Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr, calls 'dadirri'.

'Once in a while', says Lane, 'something comes up. Is it from inside me or from inside him? I never know for sure. It may be a feeling of being unaccountably loved in that moment, feeling utterly at home in the hollow of that tree. Or it may be a thought that arises: "Just stand there", it might say. "All you really need will come to you". I hear this spoken with authority, because it's something only a tree can say with conviction. Grandfather can't go anywhere for what he needs. He has to wait for everything to come to him. When a tree says this, I listen".⁸ The more he enters into relationship with Grandfather, Lane says, the more his perception of everything

⁶ Belden Lane, *The Great Conversation: Nature and the Care of the Soul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), p.17.

⁷ Lane, *The Great Conversation*, p.17.

⁸ Lane, *The Great Conversation*, p.23.

else in nature changes. 'I've learned to expect the rest of the world to be alive as well'. No longer is the 'environment' a collection of objects, but 'a communion of subjects'.⁹ A new light is being shed on things, the sense of possibility and connection expanded.

I know this seems a long way from the saints coming marching in. And a key difference is that whereas we become saints by intentionally yielding ourselves to God, it seems easier for 'Grandfather' and the rest of the natural world simply to be themselves and thereby show forth the fullness of their Creator. Even so, as many of us sense a call to widen our awareness of the web of life that connects us, to listen to the Spirit in and through the life of the world, is it so far-fetched to think of the saints as including not only the teachers and elders of the whole human family, but also the elders of the whole earth community? For we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses ... if only we have ears to hear.

For all the saints, then, let us give our thanks and praise.

⁹ Citing Thomas Berry in Lane, *The Great Conversation*, p.23.