

Sermon – All Saints Day - Holy Trinity, Valley Stream NY

John 11: 32-44

“To the church of God, to those that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called as saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 1:2).

The apostle Paul may have written these words to this church today. Paul understood that those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus are saints, and worthy to be remembered as such. Paul was writing to the people of the church of Corinth but he could have been very well writing to us.

Today we celebrate the feast of All Saints, a day when we remember and celebrate all the saints who through the ages have taken to heart their baptismal vows and lived lives worthy of the promises of Christ. Today also we especially welcome all the new saints, those that will be baptized into the body of Christ at churches throughout the world. It is through our baptism that we are sanctified in Christ Jesus and sealed with the Holy Spirit. It is through baptism that we start the journey to become saints, as Paul implied.

Our lives are journeys from birth to death. Sometimes a life is extraordinarily short and sometimes remarkably long. No matter what length a life is Jesus calls us to live it in a way that is true and blessed. The Hebrew word for ‘happy or blessed’ *Ashar* found in the opening sentence of Psalm 1 is best translated as *to find the right road*.

Our life’s journey is to find the right road. For Christians it starts with our baptism. Jesus invites us to walk life’s journey together, to learn and discover truth as Jesus and the prophets of God lay it out, thus following the right road.

Our discipleship, our responding to the call of Jesus and our baptism into the body of Christ reminds us of the journey of faithfulness that is life as God intended. When Jesus calls us to this journey we join a long line of all those that have gone before and those who are our contemporary companions on the way.

The Feast of All Saints is a time in our liturgical calendar when we pause to reflect on what sainthood looks like in the light of the blessings Jesus has taught and all the saints that have made a difference to our lives. We can reflect on our feelings stirred by these words of Jesus and the memories of the saints we know and the response that we feel called to make.

We are indeed called upon to meditate on the lives of the blessed saints as we make decisions about our own lives. There are great discoveries to be had about life by reflecting on the lives of those people central to one’s life journey.

Our history is full of saints that have followed the right road. Their life stories are often documented and upheld for us as examples of virtuous lives. Some have had their lives documented in ways that makes their discoveries and experiences accessible to us. Many more though are not widely known and their lives have not been documented.

The sacred stories of the lesser known are no less virtuous however. For many of us we hold dear the memory of those people that shaped our lives of faith. Maybe a parent or grand parent, a priest or pastor, a trusted friend or companion. Maybe it was the saints of old like Benedict, Francis, Constance and her companions (the martyrs of Memphis), or for me Mary MacKillop, Australia's first formally recognized saint, who inspires us to deeper spiritual lives of service.

For Jesus many people shaped his own life of faith. His heavenly father first and foremost, his parents, his cousin John, the temple priests and rabbis, his friends and disciples, those he healed. Today we hear of the story of the death of his friend Lazarus. The news of his death and the mourning of Mary, Martha and their companions brought Jesus to tears. Lazarus must have meant a lot to Jesus as he is one of only a recorded few who Jesus brought back to life.

Many people have shaped my Christian life and all are saints, though not all are perfect and not all were baptized. Each person was important at different times in my life. Some were only in my life for a few hours or days. I think of Reenie, a homeless women I met on the streets of Chelsea or Lyn, a transgender women I met when she was a patient at NYP Columbia.

Another was Jordan, a young reformed gang member I met who found Jesus in prison. His desire to turn his life around and be loved was inspirational. Radio John, a man from my parish in Sydney who suffered from mental illness and homelessness. He taught me that serious disabilities were no barrier to prayer. One of his prayers brought me to tears one morning. Margaret, the wife of one of my priests who help me understand a recurrent dream I was having about a fear of committing to a life in Jesus name. They all continue to inform my life through the memories I have of our encounters.

Others have been in my life for longer. I remember my parents who had me baptized and raised me in a Christ centered house, Dorothy, our neighbor and a women of deep faith who sacrificed her own life to care for her mother, and Prue, an old friend from my church in Sydney who constantly teaches me that one's own trauma and grief are not barriers to ministry but rather experiences that bring us closer to those we serve in Christ's name. Each has informed my understanding of God and deepened my spiritual life.

We have to have open hearts to enable us to be informed by the blessings offered by these saints. We have to be able to understand what we are experiencing as God's spirit seeks to shape our lives by connecting us to these people.

Learning how to be open takes commitment and perseverance. Our spiritual openness comes through our desire for fellowship, for common worship and prayer, for a desire for spiritual formation and enquiry, to serve others in Jesus' name and our willingness to share our experiences with others.

Most of us in our diocesan family are well educated and conversant with the complex world in which we live. Many though are not conversant with the development of an inner spiritual life. It can be easy to shut down spiritual formation but when we do we will find life more difficult and we will experience God as moving away.

Ignoring the development of our spiritual lives will result in us becoming dry and finding the discoveries of life more materialistic and less heartfelt. Being able to recognize when we are growing apart from God is the start of the journey back to God and getting on the right road with Jesus. God always stands ready to welcome us back and provides saints as companions and inspirational guides.

All of the saints that have gone before us have experienced difficult periods in their lives and at times felt far from God. Most have recognized their folly and made the decision to turn back. Some just persevered in their faith, accepting suffering as a by-product of life and ministry and even in their darkest hours finding their strength in the suffering of Jesus and the hope of the resurrection.

So, we give thanks this day for all the saints that have gone before us, those that are around us and those here with us this morning. Let us also give thanks that new saints will be baptized somewhere today and start a new life in Christ.

Amen