

All Saints Day
St. Paul's, Milford
Sunday 1 November 2015: 8:00 and 9:30

Today we celebrate All Saints Day. It is way up there in terms of importance in the Church – just below Christmas and Easter. Three years ago, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, visited New Zealand. His visit coincided with All Saints. Some of you may have heard him speak at the Pacific Events Centre in Manukau City. During that visit he called in at Turangawaewae to meet the Maori King. And there he said something very significant.

This land in which we meet, this land of great beauty and great gifts is called Aotearoa, the land of the Long White Cloud. And today, when we celebrate the feast of All Saints, we may very well think of that phrase in scripture, where we are told that we live in the presence of a great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1). Perhaps this is in a very particular way a land of witnesses. A land where we know that we stand in the presence of many witnesses. Where **our** acts and **our** thoughts and **our** relations with one another are witnessed by those who have gone before us. So that their witness helps us to bear witness in our own generation. So that we know that we stand with them before the eyes of God. And so also today we thank God that the cloud of witnesses is over us and around us, calling us to answer for our faith, for our lives, for our relationships before God.

If we were to say one thing about All Saints it would be that it's a reminder that we are not alone. **We are not alone.** Others have gone before us. Shown us the way. Turned on a light so we can see where we're going. Taken us by the hand. Going first so that we may follow. They've lived their lives and we've seen how they did that. They've given us a model. So much easier than trying to work it out for ourselves.

Who was that person who showed us the way; showed **you** the way? It might have been several people. Maybe a kindly neighbour. A favourite aunt or uncle. That first school teacher. A high school teacher who inspired us, who opened new doors, who took us to places we'd never been before. Our childhood vicar or Sunday School teacher. Chances are it wasn't anything they said that mattered, but rather how they said it; how they reacted, how they lived life. They showed us how to live; how to model our lives. Just spare a thought now to remember them in your hearts. (*Pause*)

In my own ministry I've served in a variety of roles in a number of places, in a number of countries. I don't think I've ever felt lonely or ever felt alone, even though I've been miles from home. I never felt bored! Even when I've had to work alone, or so it seemed, I've felt that others were praying for me, or remembering me, or knowing what I was doing. And of course I had their examples to follow and to show me the way.

I've had that same feeling when I've gone into a church I was familiar with.

Mrs So and so sat there; old so and so sat over there and kept looking at his watch! Dear Miss So and so always seemed to be in a hurry to make her communion. Chirpy little Mrs What's her name who loved welcoming newcomers. Mrs Thingy who looked after the flowers and always carried one of those teapot things with a long spout with water. Or the ladies in the parish hall with those magnificent teapots which had two spouts, so you could pour out two cups of tea at once.

And so we could go on. I mention all this to make the point that the saints don't always live in stained glass windows. Some do and we can learn from them. People like Paul, Peter, Andrew, Francis and so on. But most of them are ordinary people who lived extraordinary lives. Ordinary people who became special.

One of the passages often read on All Saints – although not here today – is from the Sermon on the Mount. We know it as the Beatitudes. We know it too as the hymn *Blest are the pure in heart*. It's a celebration of ordinary people who live extraordinary lives. Blessed are the merciful, those who mourn, those who make peace, the humble, the pure in heart, those who are persecuted. For it's such as these who will enter the kingdom of heaven.

Another passage too which we're not using today, from Isaiah. He talks of the holy mountain – *these I will bring to my holy mountain* - and then of the house of prayer. *My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people*. A place where the Lord God gathers all the outcasts of Israel and brings them in and gathers others and seats them beside those already gathered. Notice that he doesn't put them in a place all by themselves, but brings them into a place where he places them with others and builds a community. *I will gather others to them besides those already gathered*.

One passage we do have today though is from the book of Wisdom:

Having been disciplined a little they will receive great good, because God tested them and found them worthy of himself; like gold in the furnace he tried them.

Such people have lived life, fought the battle of life, been tested and been re-shaped by life, by their deeds, by other people, by the circumstances around them. Part of the baptism service calls us to continually try to live as Children of God. And of course we never quite make it. We fall short; we don't measure up. We're aware too that the other people in our family don't measure up either. But sadly, we're sometimes more aware of their failures than of our own.

I read a little poem the other day. It's one of those things that we come across from time to time and tuck away somewhere. It goes like this:

*Oh, to live above, with Saints we love,
Oh, that will be Glory.
Oh, to live below, with Saints we know,
Well, that's a different story!*

The struggle of the Christian life is to remember that we are saints in spite of our failures and to remember that the other people in our Church family are saints as well, in spite of their imperfections.

Have you ever attended a reunion, perhaps a school or a parish reunion? You look around and see people you think you know – or should know. And you think 'She's let herself go, hasn't she? He looks much older than me; in fact they all do!' The other side of that, of course, is to look in the

mirror in the morning and then reveal to others: “I looked in the mirror and there was that old guy staring at me!”

But go back to the school reunion. Beyond seeing those faces we once recognised, we’re given the grace to go back in time, to see what it was that we had in common. What was it that shaped me and all my friends? We can look beyond the surface and see the mark of that family, that group, that school. Some have done OK, others have suffered, others life hasn’t treated well. But there they are, all together in one place, now in this photo, celebrating and enjoying their relatedness to each other - and perhaps to God.

Our calling on this All Saints Day is to remember **our** sainted-ness, **our** blessedness, **our** holiness. It’s a gift from God; a gift we were given for the benefit of the world. A day to remember the saintliness, the blessedness, the holiness of **others**. To remember that they too are the beloved Children of God and that we are to treat them that way.

Our Gospel today tells of the death of Lazarus. Lazarus, a close friend of Jesus, brother of Mary and Martha of Bethany, whom we thought about a few Sundays ago. And I must admit that I wondered why that passage had been chosen for today. But as I wondered it became clear that this is a passage that tells us that the gap between life and death is wafer-thin. As we sit with a loved one or sit with family (as I’ve been privileged to do many times) it’s not always apparent that they’ve passed on. It’s been so peaceful, so gentle. The gap between life and death is wafer-thin. And when you think about it, it takes a life, a whole life – whether it be a long

life or a short life – to reach that point. The burial service in the old Book of Common Prayer captured it well: *In the midst of life we are in death.* Words used then at funerals. For some reason not included in our otherwise excellent funeral service in the NZPB. Expressing an important Christian idea that was understood for many centuries, but is now sacrificed on the altar of modern culture — that death is about life.

Those haunting words of John Donne, poet and clergyman, remind us too that when somebody dies it's as if a piece of us dies too, dies with them:

*No man is an island entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as
if a promontory were.*

...

*Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in
mankind,
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee.*

There's another prayer used at funerals. I nearly always use it. Written by the great John Henry Newman:

*Support us, Lord, all the day long of this troubled life,
until the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes,
the busy world is hushed,
the fever of life is over,
and our work is done.
Then, Lord, in your mercy, give us safe lodging, a holy rest,
and peace at the last. Amen.*

I pray that you, in life or in death, may have safe lodging, a holy rest, and peace not only at the last, but at all times.