

Sermon for Evensong at All Saints' Day, 4th November 2018



Isaiah 65:17-25; Hebrews 11:32-12:2 - There but not There?

As you can see, you've got some neighbours in church today. 17 silhouettes, each one representing a soldier from Stoke D'Abernon who died fighting in the First World War. There are little plaques in front of each one of the silhouettes which tell you the name of each of the soldiers and the regiment that he belonged to. There are two pairs of brothers, you will find. All over the country there

are churches with these silhouettes in. They have been created by a new charity called 'Remembered' and our Vanessa Richards is a trustee of the charity. A number of us have subscribed to buy the silhouettes which are in the pews.

These soldiers are 'there are but not there', which is the name of the campaign, launched by this charity called Remembered, to remind people, and especially people like me who have never been in a war, to remind us of the great sacrifice and bravery of our soldiers - in what they had hoped would be the 'war to end all wars'; and also to raise money for the relief of mental conditions caused by war such as PTSD, combat stress, which used to be called 'shell shock'.

Our silhouettes were first installed in the pews on Friday, for the All Souls service, when we remembered the dead, our dear departed, and today is All Saints, when we remember and celebrate that 'cloud of witnesses' that was mentioned in our second lesson from Hebrews.

We will of course come back and make our main act of remembrance next Sunday. Today we are celebrating All Saints' Day, which follows very closely after our celebration of All Souls. Using the word 'souls' reflects the idea that we are made up of a body and a soul and that in some sense our souls are immortal and eternal, carrying on after our bodies have died. So All Souls is the great commemoration of the dead.

Today we focus on the idea of saints and sainthood. Through both these festivals we may get a glimpse of heaven; this is a chance for us to reflect on what we can understand of heaven, at All Souls on life after death and today on the saints, the great 'cloud of witnesses,' in history - and perhaps nearer to home as well.

We can think of ‘saints’ in two ways. On one hand we can understand the expression ‘saint’ to cover all Christian people. St Paul's letters refer to the ‘saints’ at Ephesus and in Rome and in Jerusalem, meaning the normal members of the congregation in each church. So in that sense we are all saints. We are the saints at Stoke d’Abernon.

The other sense, which is perhaps the one which we would normally think of when we use the word ‘saint’, is to identify people who lead exemplary and virtuous lives, who are witnesses to the gospel of Jesus through the self-denying love which they show.

We should notice that there is a difference between the beliefs of the Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church where saints are concerned. Roman Catholics see the saints as being so close to God and to Jesus that they can intercede for us. In other words, Catholics address prayers to one or other of the saints and ask them to pass on their prayers to God. As Protestants we use the same language and perhaps adopt the same thought when we end our prayers with the words ‘through Jesus Christ our Lord’, but this is as far as we go.

Praying through a saint, through a person who speaks for us to God, is a very old idea, a mediaeval idea, but it was one of the things which was attacked by Martin Luther and the Reformation theologians. If you look at the 39 Articles of Religion at the back of your little blue Prayer Book, if you look at article 22 on page 620 and article 31 on page 624, you will see what the reformers were objecting to.

Article 31 was against people saying masses for the dead - at first sight, against what we were doing on Thursday. Before the Reformation, people left money in their wills to pay for masses to be said for them after they had died, to help them to get to heaven

and not be stuck in ‘Purgatory’, a kind of half-way house for those whose virtues were not clear enough for them to pass straight through the Pearly Gates. People built ‘chantries’, chapels where they could be remembered and prayed for.

Our Norbury Chapel is an example of a chantry. It was built for Sir John Norbury after the Battle of Bosworth which ended the Wars of the Roses in 1485. Sir John died in 1521, before the Reformation, or more particularly before Henry VIII. His original statue must have been destroyed in the Elizabethan purge on ‘monuments of superstition’, and now his monument is the little figure of a kneeling knight, whose armour is in the style of Charles I’s time, 100 years later.

I think that we can agree with Article 31 that Christ’s sacrifice on the cross is the only thing we need, in order to be reconciled with God and forgiven our sins. We don’t need to make a ritual sacrifice as well, in order to buy forgiveness for someone’s sins. But remembering our dear ones by reading out their names doesn’t go against this, I believe.

Martin Luther, who started the objections to ‘masses for the dead’, was aiming at what he thought was a racket run by the Roman church, getting money for saying masses and building chantries, although there was no theological justification for it. We should remember that Jesus’ salvation is for all, not just for the ones whose names we read out in church - but that’s not a reason for us not to remember our dear departed ones.

Article 22 is even more specific about the worship, or ‘veneration’, as it was called, of saints, their statues and pictures. It reads:

‘The Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory, Pardons, Worshipping, and Adoration, as well of Images as of

Reliques, and also invocation of Saints, is a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God'.

The reformers thought that there was an element of idolatry, that people were worshipping the saints rather than God, and that there was really no need to use an agent in order to be able to say your prayers to God. There is a reflection of John Calvin's idea of the 'priesthood of all believers' here. Again, in the Jewish faith, only the High Priest could enter the the Holy of Holies, in the Temple, to come close to God, once a year only, without being consumed (cf Moses in Exodus 33:20). This is one place where the idea, that God needs to be approached through somebody, comes from. In our first lesson from Isaiah there is also the example of prophecy, where God speaks through the mouth of a human, a prophet.

Because St Mary's is so old - its origins are 7th century Saxon - if you look around, it shows you signs of all this historical theology. You will see some images of saints in some of the windows, but the only statue of a saint is the statue of Mary, the Madonna and Child, at the front. Actually pretty well all the images of saints, the windows and the statue, although they are often of mediaeval origin, were imported during Revd John Waterson's time (1949-1983), because whatever was here before the Reformation was removed or smashed up. In the Baptistry some of the windows contain bits of the remains of pre-Reformation windows, but I think that is all.

The Church of England is often called 'catholic and reformed'. Henry VIII was a faithful Roman Catholic, except for his little difficulty with the Pope! The question of how we look at saints today is a good example of how our church's theology and history are combined in a rich mixture. The greatest of the saints is Mary, the mother of Jesus, who was always closest to him, even at the end; his mother stood grieving at the foot of the cross. Who better,

who closer, to intercede, if you feel you need someone to do it? The words of the 'Hail Mary', which Roman Catholics use almost as much as the Lord's Prayer, end with

'Holy Mary, Mother of God,
Pray for us sinners now,
And at the hour of death'.

Indeed Mary is the saint preferred by more people than any other to pray through, in the Roman Catholic Church, where veneration of the saints and praying through them still thrives - they still create saints, for instance recently Archbishop Romero, the Bishop of San Salvador, who was martyred on the steps of his cathedral in 1980, and who was renowned as a liberation theologian, concerned to minister to the poor.

So I have taken you through the story of what it could mean to be a saint. We can be one of the saints at Stoke d'Abernon, one of the people who turn up faithfully in the pews, contribute to good causes and are happy to let people know that this is what we do on a Sunday and indeed, perhaps, what we do on other days. Church saints are involved, involved in church activities.

Or you could be a witness. You could stand up and say to other people what it means to be a Christian in today's society. You could do things, things which actually take a little bit longer than signing a cheque or turning up to a meeting. You would have to show commitment. The touchstone for being this kind of saint is selfless giving.

Or you might even be a martyr. 'Martyr', after all, is just the Greek word for a 'witness'. Your being a witness may have a price. People may not approve of what you have to say. You may be put to the test as a result. Being a saint, being a witness to the gospel of Christ, may be tough.

There have been occasions when some of you have said to me that my interpretation of what it is to be a practical Christian, to be a practical witness, shades over into politics. Well, on this occasion, I leave it to you. You work out what it would be for you to be a saint. All I would say to you is that I think we all have it in us to be some kind of a saint. Which one are you?

Amen.

Hugh Bryant