

All Saints

1 11 09

Almighty God,
you have knit together your elect
in one communion and fellowship
in the mystical body of your Son Christ, our Lord:
grant us grace so to follow your blessed saints
in all virtuous and godly living
that we may come to those inexpressible joys
that you have prepared for those who truly love you.

My text may be found in Paul's letter to the Romans chapter 1 and verse 7:

'To all God's beloved in Rome who are called to be saints'

Last Sunday, I was back in Potters Bar, taking the services in the parish church. My former church is dedicated not only to St Mary the Virgin but also to All Saints. So in Potters Bar today, our brothers and sisters in Christ will be celebrating their second patronal festival, celebrating that great crowd of witnesses to the faith who have gone before us and who have, by their lives, given us an example of the truth of the good news that God the Father has made himself known in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, and that inspired and informed by his Holy Spirit, we are in our turn able to live truly useful Christian lives.

Last month, on 11th October, Pope Benedict XVI canonised a local Breton girl from Cancale, Jeanne Jugon, who in C19 founded Les Petites Soeurs des Pauvres. I think it is good that we have such a number and variety of saints from all ages including our own who can provide role models to inspire our efforts to lead Christian lives. In one sense, however, we are all saints; we are all called to live authentic Christian lives, to practise those virtues which characterise the Christian life, to be as far as possible real Christians, the salt of the earth, mirrors reflecting the light of Christ.

Paul had no doubt of that all Christians were saints as my text from the opening of his letter to the church in Rome suggests: 'To all God's beloved in Rome who are called to be saints'. Each person in the church, every Christian, every one of us, is being called to a life of holiness and Paul repeats this belief in the opening greeting in his letters to the church at Corinth, Ephesus, Philippiae and Colossae all of which open with a similar greeting to all members in each church addressing them all as saints.

So if we are all potential saints, what does it mean to live a saintly life in everyday terms? As Christians, we believe in a Trinitarian God: God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and the key to Christian living is a trinity of love: love of God; love of neighbour; love of self. Jesus, when asked by a Teacher of the Law what was the greatest commandment, pointed to two: to love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves. These two commands Jesus says summarise the whole of the Old Testament Jewish Law.

What does it mean to love God? Perhaps the start of loving God is respect. Again the Old Testament is a good guide for in the book of Proverbs we read that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. To respect God is to acknowledge his existence, to be grateful for the life he has given us and to believe that God plays a vital part in our lives. If God loves us, we should love him and how can we better show our love for God than by how we love our neighbour?

Neighbour love is the second commandment. Who is our neighbour can best be answered by the parable of the Good Samaritan in which Jesus chooses an unlikely hero in the story of a man mugged and left bleeding and unconscious on the Jericho road. It is a Samaritan, the traditional enemy of the Jew, who stops to help a Jew in distress when those who should have helped have already passed by on the other side. To love our neighbour is to love our fellow human beings. And how better can we show our love than by taking time and trouble to cherish them; to help them in their need; to restore them to health and to wholeness?

But to love our neighbour also means to love ourselves for how can we love anyone else if first we do not value who we are? Self-love is not necessarily selfish if being happy in ourselves allows us to make others happy. If we believe we are worthless, how can we think other people are worth loving? How can we possibly love and value anyone else if first we do not love and cherish ourselves? Sadly, self-loathing can lead to contempt for and the mistreatment of other people. If we are unhappy in ourselves, we are unlikely to make any one else happy.

Now we may well understandably be ill-at-ease with the idea that we are all potential saints. Being holy and being called pious is not something anyone is likely to seek for themselves but it is a goal at which all Christians, not least we ourselves, are being invited to aim. Today is the feast of All Saints and as Christians not only are we all in communion with the saints of who have gone before us as well as the saints of this age, but we all share, each one of us, the vocation to be saints by putting into practice a trinity of love: by loving God our neighbour and ourselves.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's Dinard

1st November, 2009

H: Sermon 21: All Saints

