

The Communion of Saints

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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.

Our text this morning is taken not from the Bible but from the Apostles Creed:

'We believe . . . in the communion of saints'

So what do you think a saint is ? What do you think about saints ?

Are saints holy Joes, good guys, pious folk ? Are saints heroes of our faith, those whose blood has been shed, whose lives have been taken, so that our faith may grow and spread ? Are they teachers of the faith who have helped us to understand better what it can mean to be Christians and how we might usefully lead Christian lives ? Are they people of the past who are present in our lives because we pray to them to intercede for us with God in whose presence they now live and dwell and have their being ?

Questions, questions, questions and as ever your answer will depend on the tradition in which you are rooted. For Catholics and Orthodox Christians, the tradition of praying to God through the saints is normal, not least to Mary, the mother of Jesus, Theotókos, Virgin, Immaculate. With the Reformation, followers of Calvin and Zwingli, critical of the mediaeval abuses associated with the practice, unequivocally rejected the idea. Anglicans as ever have differing views on the subject – nothing new there ! In the 39 Articles which embody Anglican doctrine, ‘Article 22 Of Purgatory’ 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.’ Very Protestant but a more Catholic view emerges with the Oxford Movement and Tractarians who once again affirmed the possibility of our respect for saints and the possibility of prayer to God through talking to those who are now ever present in the presence of the one who loves each one of us more than we can know.

You must know I personally respect the saints, not least our own patron saint, Nathaniel Bartholomew, and his friend, Philip, whose icons now beautify our church and whose name commemorates him. Our stained glass is alight with images of the saints, the twelve disciples, Mary, Joseph, Mary Magdalene.

But since we are a church in which people come from a mix of backgrounds and traditions, how you personally see the saints will necessarily, understandably, differ. So let me content myself by trying to answer what we may understand by the phrase which is our text today – **the communion of saints**. According to ‘The

Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church' – a gift to me from Sybil Fagg – there are three ways of understanding what might be meant.

The traditional view of the communion of Saints is of 'the spiritual union existing between each Christian and Christ and so between each and every Christian' – a present reality reaching out across the boundaries of time and space.

A second definition is more limited: 'The fellowship of Christians upon earth only' which restricts our link one with another to this time and place.

A third defines it as 'the sharing of holy things, i.e. the share which all Christians have on the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist'. In coming together in communion, we are in communion not only with God and those who are worshipping here with us but with all Christians who have, are and will do the same !

So today, when we celebrate All Saints', yesterday 1st November Tous Saints, the day on which our French neighbours will have visited their family graves and placed chrysanthemums thereon, we can be encouraged by the thought that we believe in the communion of saints and that whether or not we actually pray to God through praying to a saint, those who have gone before us can still be an inspiration and source of encouragement to us.

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

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G: Sermons 30 : Communion of Saints

