

Martin Luther

5 11 17

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 one word that you've just heard repeated nine times in today's gospel from the opening verses of Matthew chapter 5:

'Blessed'

Well, I love the idea that, this year, we are celebrating All Saints' Day three days after All Souls' Day when you know, as well as I do, that All Saints, Tous Saints falls on November 1st – a public holiday here in France. But even though it is Guy Fawkes Day today back in England, Bonfire Night, it is good that according to our Anglican practice we can, if we wish, transfer the day to the following Sunday so that we can all be here in St Bart's to mark this special day.

And my question to you this morning, on All Saints' Day, is what is a saint? And our text from Matthew chapter 5 neatly, succinctly, sums it up for us – **'Blessed'**.

A saint is someone who is blessed, someone who is favoured by God, holy, righteous, trying to live the good life informed by love, by love of God and by love of neighbour even as we love ourselves. And, in one sense, we are all saints in the sense that we are trying to live a proper, Christian life, informed by proper, Christian principles. And, in another sense, there are those whom the Church has singled out for special veneration like St Lucy, St Nicholas or St Jean Jugan, the foundress of the Little Sister of the Poor, the nuns who looked after Irène Bishop in the last months of her life here in France.

But, today, I am conscious that 500 years ago on 31st October, 1517, Dr Martin Luther, an Augustinian friar and lecturer in the theology at the University of Wittenberg, posted his 95 theses on the door of the Castle Church of that city and thereby triggering the Reformation.

So why might we consider Luther to be a saint ? Well, with detached hindsight and the benefit of just having read Peter Stanford's book 'Martin Luther Catholic Dissent' may I suggest the following.

Luther was a good, conscientious Catholic, a priest who wrestled with the thought of his unworthiness, sinfulness, tormented by a sense the devil was physically hurting him - consternation through constipation. And the word in German for his state of mind is 'Anfechtung'. Well beyond my 'O' Level German, Anfechtung is a complex idea, hard to translate succinctly but combining the strands of angst, hopelessness, helplessness along with despondency, despair and depression and also embracing the notion of temptation, assault by the devil and testing by God.

What Luther wrestled with was the idea that we were justified in the eyes of God not by what we did but simply by God's grace. Our faith in God, our belief in his Son, Jesus Christ, was the door that opened salvation to us and good works were the consequence of our faith not a means to earn grace and good standing. The notion that one could buy salvation through the purchase of indulgences was, therefore, anathema to him as it is to us today.

Now, I haven't the time to do justice to Martin Luther in this simple, ten minute sermon nor, I'm guessing, have you the stamina to listen attentively if I tried to preach at length, like the standard forty minutes sermon I sometimes heard in the early 1970s at Above Bar Church in Southampton by the then minister there, Dr Leith Samuels. Instead, let me simply assert that Martin Luther was the right man at the right time in the right place to assert the primacy of scripture and to challenge the then corrupt authority of the Church.

But let me leave you with this thought: that, to my mind, Martin Luther's two gifts to us as Christians were the translation of the Bible and the liturgy into the language of the common people, in his case German; and his understanding of the real presence of Christ in the broken bread and wine outpoured as a matter of essence not accident, that on the outside the bread was bread and the wine was wine but Jesus was essentially present therein as we remember him by eating the bread and drinking the wine. We perceive his body broken for us and his blood shed for us dying for us on the cross.

Well I hope that helps: the thought we are all saints and today, in 2017, we can remember Martin Luther, an uncanonised saint of our Church.

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

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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