

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.*

Today we celebrate All Saints Sunday. Who do you think of when you hear the word ‘saint?’ Maybe someone who is especially holy or religious, like St Francis of Assisi, St Patrick, or in our time, Mother Teresa of Calcutta. You may believe that it’s just the Roman Catholics who celebrate saint’s days as they do have a saint for every day of the year. But we Anglicans also commemorate the lives of many saints. In fact, the Anglican church published this book of saints – it’s called, ‘For All the Saints: Prayers and Readings for Saints’ Days.’

So, what makes someone a saint? It might be a person who has not only lived a holy life, but has been officially recognized (the technical term is “canonized”) by the Roman Catholic church for their “heroic virtue” and evidence of at least one miracle performed in their lifetime. But as it is used in the Bible, the term ‘saint’ has a different meaning.

We can say that a saint is a ‘holy one,’ who is set apart for God’s special purposes. If that’s the case, then every follower of Jesus is a saint. The apostle Paul refers to ‘the saints’ many times in his writings. At the beginning of the first letter to the Corinthians he says, “Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours: (1 Corinthians 1:1–2).” In Romans 8:27, Paul says that Christ “makes intercession for the saints.” In the surrounding verses it explains that the saints have the Holy Spirit, love God, and are “called according to his purpose.” So, for Paul, a saint is someone who is “sanctified in Christ Jesus.” This describes all who believe in Christ and are made holy by his grace.

If we look at the word Paul uses to describe a saint, it’s the Greek word ἅγιος (hagios) - an adjective normally translated as ‘holy.’ Here it’s used to mean, “those who are holy” (i.e. consecrated to God). Saint is a technical term meaning to be set apart, whether in the Greek hagios or the Hebrew equivalent, qadosh. In itself, it doesn’t mean anything regarding love, godliness or righteousness. In the Bible, it simply means set apart for God. If you keep away from the ungodly lifestyle of this world, and follow God’s laws and precepts, then you’re a saint.

So basically, we are all saints. Welcome to sainthood!

What does that mean for us? Well first, we don’t have to worry about becoming holy. As if we can, on our own. We accept the gift of God’s grace, and relax, and live our lives freed by that grace. We can still admire the great saints. Learn from them. Even imitate them. But we don’t have to think of them as being in a different league from us. We are all in the same league, all saved by the same loving God, all recipients of the same amazing grace.

What is our responsibility as ‘holy ones?’ First, our lives should reflect that reality. Peter challenges believers “not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct” (1 Pet 1:14-15). As Christians we try and show that we are set apart for God’s special purposes by living lives that reflect (however imperfectly) the high values of Jesus himself.

Which leads us to today’s gospel reading.

The reading from Luke has many instructions from Jesus on how we are to live, and what it means to be his followers. It’s the reading that we call ‘The Sermon on the Plain.’ In Matthew’s gospel it’s called the Sermon on the Mount, and it is mostly the Beatitudes. But in the reading, first Jesus looks at his disciples, and says, “Blessed are you.” First, we are blessed. First, we are declared saints.

The passage then continues with Jesus blessing the poor and hungry. Jesus blesses his disciples first as they are probably poor and hungry. They might weep, be hated, excluded and reviled on account of Jesus. But they are blessed, because Jesus says so. And we are blessed for a purpose, not only for ourselves. Think of the people in the Bible who were blessed for a purpose. When God created Adam and Eve, he blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and multiply ... and be responsible for every living thing, and Earth itself.” (Genesis 1:28). And God said to Mary, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.” (Luke 1:42). And how about God’s blessing of Abraham? One of the most important blessings in all of Scripture. When God said: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis:12:2-3).

When Jesus blessed them all, it was for a reason. It was so that the world would be blessed through them. The world is blessed through all the saints, including us, so that we can make a difference for Jesus in the world.

What is our purpose? In today’s gospel reading, Jesus goes on to describe this purpose in a very powerful way. He tells us that we are blessed by him so that we can: love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, pray for those who abuse us; offer the other cheek to anyone who strikes us; offer our shirt to anyone who takes away our coat; give to everyone who begs from us; and do to others as we would have them do to us. Our broken world needs people to live like this. Jesus challenges us to be agents of peace and unity. By loving our enemies, doing good to those who hate us; and blessing those who curse us. This is not easy. It may even lead to our being hated, excluded, reviled, or defamed, which is difficult. It doesn’t mean though, that we are not to stand up for justice in the world, where people are oppressed because they are pacifists.

It means that Jesus has declared us blessed and we are to be a blessing for others. And we are called to continue Jesus’ mission to bless the poor, and the hungry, and the weeping, and the hated and excluded in our community. This is so important to Jesus, and it should be just as important to us.

We are called to help the least among us know how much God cares about them, just as Jesus did in his powerful Sermon on the Plain.

At times it all seems too overwhelming a task for us when we all have problems of our own. But small things can make a difference in the lives of others, and we must also accept small blessings from others.

It helps to remember that we are doing this because we are already saints, already saved, already loved, and already blessed. And this is simply a way to return the favour. We are simply doing for others what Jesus did for us.

AMEN