

Sermon 31 October 2021 All Saints Day

Revelation 21:1-6a and John 11:34-44

Malcolm Guite, in the Church Times this week, draws his readers attention to the simple word shared by All Saints Day and All Souls Day. He describes 'All' as being a wonderfully biblical and inclusive little word.

All.

How 'All' seems to widen the circle of God's love. And makes us wonder if we might be included within the embrace.

How often we think on a day such as All Saints, of those who are great and holy, those who were/are prominent thinkers, prominent priests, prophets, teachers, people who are/have been in the spotlight, who are admired within and without the church. Maybe we think that this sort of a day is when we revere those who are departed?

I've been thinking about the ordinary saints – those still living, unacknowledged in our midst. People often unknown to us, nameless even if we have experienced care from them. People who we overlook, who serve in secret. People who have carried out acts of bravery, whose names we once knew but have now forgotten. Those perhaps who are like the prophets of old – telling us truths that we find hard to listen to.

I've been looking out for saints this week.

There was the teenage boy I met at the zoo, who in the underground tunnel in the seal enclosure gently encouraged me to look up, to see the seal above my head catching fish. He tapped my shoulder and spoke softly, saying look, isn't it wonderful. And it was. And then when the seals started to swim over and around us, he nudged me wanting to me to see how glorious they were in the water, their natural environment. I spoke with his mother, the boy was troubled and found peace watching the seals. And he had given me a gift, the gift of looking, of not hurrying on, for I spent a good fifteen minutes there. He was shy when I thanked him.

Or there are the litter pickers who clear up wind blown rubbish, either the result of thoughtlessness or carelessness or just bin collectors doing a job under time constraints. Making our living place a cleaner place.

There are the bin collectors, the street cleaners, the bus drivers, delivery drivers, shop assistants, teachers, hospital staff, carers paid and unpaid, people on the end of phone help lines– all 'just doing their job'. Jobs which we dimly recognise.

Vaccinators, marshalls, administrators, often all volunteers, working together to deliver an amazing mass programme of protection.

Those who come to mind when we are asked to name someone who has inspired us. The person I tend to think of is a woman called Jo Spencer, who, if I can be half the woman she was, I will be content. We will each have someone in mind.

Medecins Sans Frontieres – people who go into places torn apart by war and by natural disasters, bringing medical care and hope.

Water Aid engineers who bring clean water to remote places of the world.

Rescuers, like those who saved the Chilean Miners and the boys football team in Thailand.

People who speak out against injustice and campaign, and especially children and young people, like Greta Thunberg, who challenge us to look again at our lifestyles and inspire us to do something to protect our creation.

Maybe this all feels a bit too much like a list. But I could go on, and you too could populate your own lists and it would be good to hear who is on your list today. All Saints. A wide wide circle. Which has the capacity to include everyone.

In a sense, despite the confusion and chaos we often experience, despite the burdens that bow us down, despite the way we fall, we all have the capacity to love others and to love our lives.

I used the word ‘hope’ when describing a group of saints. Hope brings the chance of action as well as a feeling of relief. Paula Gooder, reflecting on the reading from Revelation, says that ‘believing in heaven means that we carry with us a vision of the world as God intended it to be and to strive with everything we have to bring about that kind of world in the places where we live and work.’ That seems to me that we bring hope. And we find hope in the place where God will live among us, wiping away every tear.

A place where God’s justice and mercy finds its proper place in earth. For earth need not be seen as a temporary place, but the place where we learn to live, as we will live for eternity. We need not withdraw from the world and seek only spirituality, but like all the people, all the saints, I have listed, we should seek to be driven or drawn by God and God’s spirit. We can then live more fully and more responsibly on God’s earth now. To live in ways, in principles and patterns that bring life rather than death. Every decision we make, everything we say and do can be the result of asking ourselves, is this life giving or not?

And while theologians write about the rising of Lazarus prefiguring the resurrection of Jesus; in the context of looking at ‘All’ saints, maybe what we can take from the gospel is that we can hook up with life while we live. So that eternal life is not something we are waiting for at the end time, but something we begin living right now, because we trust in the Jesus who lived life, who lives life and invites us to live it with him. To live our lives alongside all the ordinary saints we meet each day. Because standing where I am, I’m looking at a group of ordinary saints. All included within the circle of God’s love. And when I walk outside those I pass are ‘all’ included too.

I started with Malcolm Guite and I’m going to finish by reading one of his three sonnets on All Saints Day: Thanksgiving. Written nearly 10 years ago it has echoes of this past 20 months. It speaks of the way we are woven together, the way we share unguessed blessings.

‘Thanksgiving’

Sarah Thomas 31 October 2021

