

While we are certain to acknowledge that there are those individuals of particular distinction whose lives have expressed a certain level of servanthood and sacrifice, who we aspire to, we do I think need come to a more profound understanding of sainthood as seeing one another as saints called by God to live lives worthy of that calling. Hebrews 12 tells us; *"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith . . ."*

Imagine if you will, millions upon millions of people who have gone before us in the arena of heaven, watching us, cheering us on, praying for us when we struggle and fail. Some of us may be running a sprint, some throwing the javelin, others of us doing the long jump, some of us being long-distance runners, circling the track multiple times, but we are not alone in our journey, all of heaven is willing us to complete the race that we began as they once did. All of us having Jesus making intercession for us. Knowing that one day we will be reunited with him and them.

Someone was asked "Are your parents still alive?" to which he responded "Very much" "Where do they live? Are they here with you in the States or back in England where you were born?" "Neither" he said, "They are in heaven!"

It is in this context that Dietrich Bonhoeffer was able write these words:

"Nothing can make up for the absence of someone whom we love – it is nonsense to say that God fills the gap; He doesn't fill it, but on the contrary, He keeps it empty and so helps us to keep alive our former communion with each other, even at the cost of pain – The dearer and richer our memories, the more difficult the separation. But gratitude changes the pangs of memory into a tranquil joy. The beauties of the past are borne, not as a thorn in the flesh, but as a precious gift in themselves".

Ill close with a true story about a woman was diagnosed with a terminal illness, given just 3 months to live. As she was getting things in order, she contacted her pastor and asked him to visit.

After discussing her funeral arrangements, the readings and the hymns and the fact that she wanted to be buried with her bible, she asked him something very strange.... that she be buried with a fork in her right hand.

She stressed how important it was, and puzzled the pastor asked why. "In all my years of attending church functions I always remember that as someone cleared the table, I was asked to keep my fork. It was my favourite part because I knew that something was still to come. Velvet chocolate pudding, deep dish apple pie.

So, I just want people to see me there in my casket with a fork in my hand and I want them to wonder 'what's the fork for'? And I want you to tell them; "The best is yet to come". At her funeral, people walked past her open casket, they saw her dress, her bible and the fork in her right hand. During his address the pastor told them about the conversation he'd had with her and what the fork symbolised.

He said next time you reach and take a fork in your hand, remember that the best is yet to come.

As we remember those whom we love and see no longer, may we also say that as they rest in peace, may they as Saints rise too in glory for the best is yet to come.

Amen.

St Mary's / St James - All Saints Day 2019 Fr. Grant Cohen

Luke 6:20-31

A king sat on his throne thinking about all of his accomplishments—the enemies he had killed, the armies he'd conquered, the cities he'd had built, and all the other things that he had achieved in the course of his life.

But one day someone came into court and told the king a story....

"There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb that he'd raised. It had grown up with him and his children, shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. A guest came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for his guest and instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him. The king burned with anger against the man and said "As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity." For a moment the visitor and the king locked eyes, and even before a word was even spoken, the king knew what that next word would be.

"You are that man."

The visitor was Nathan the prophet, the king was David. We read in the bible that king David was a man after God's own heart. God said of him, "you shall feed my people: you shall feed them and be their shepherd." David was the greatest king Israel ever had, and it was of his lineage that Jesus came....

I tell you that story so as to point out that saints are not perfect people. And so on this All Saint's day, what does it mean to be a saint?

In the 2nd century, Polycarp, the Bishop of the church at Smyrna refused to call Caesar "God" and so he was taken to the stake but just before the fires were lit, his captors said:

"Come now, bishop, where is the harm in just saying 'Caesar is Lord' and offering incense, when it will save your life?" Polycarp replied "Eighty-six years have I served Him, and he has done me no wrong. How can I then blaspheme my King and my Saviour?"

One of Martin Luther's fellow monks was captured in the Netherlands and burned at the stake. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was imprisoned and shot in 1945.

Rachel Scott, a devout Christian teen, active in the youth group of her Church, was the first student killed in the Columbine High School Massacre in 1999.

In 2007, Islamic insurgents kidnapped 27 South Koreans traveling by bus through southern Afghanistan. They were a Christian medical team led by Pastor Bae Hyung-kyu. The Taliban tried to convert them but the pastor refused and so was shot ten times, in the head, chest and stomach.

Who of us here would be presumptuous enough to put ourselves in their league of self-sacrifice, and service?
Our church bears the name of Saint Mary mother of our Lord? And who would dare put ourselves in that league?

The Roman Catholic church says that in order to be a Saint you have to first be dead; that there must be proof of a life of 'heroic virtuous living, and that there must be two verified miracles. Following this you can be canonised which literally means to be made the spiritual standard, or lifted up as a spiritual model and Pope Francis has canonised more than 55 people, the most recent being John Henry Newman.
I guess we all imagine Saints as people to be aspired to, people who are better than us, people who have lived lives worthy of a great title, and while that might well be the case, it's not the full picture of sainthood as the story of David points out.

The city of Corinth was a quagmire of different types of people, it was known for its temples to Aphrodite where it's said there were 1000 temple prostitutes. In fact, the immorality of that city was so bad that around the world 'loose women' became known as 'Corinthian women'. But 51 years after Jesus' death Saint Paul tells them the good news and a church was born. But if you think that that church was a 'holy place' you can think again. Not only was it full of division, the immorality was so bad that it would make you blush if told you some of the things that were going on amongst the congregation. People got drunk on the communion wine whilst not allowing those who were poor to take it at all. They had a tier system according to the spiritual gifts you had or didn't have and they really were not very loving to each other at all and yet the opening verse of Paul's first letter to them says this:

"To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those made Holy in Christ Jesus, called to be Saints together with **all those** who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours."

These Corinthian Christians sound anything but saints, their lives aren't like those I just mentioned and they don't reflect the life of Jesus very much.
So, what is it that makes them saints, what is it that makes you and I a saint?

It's not what you do or don't do that makes you a saint it's what's already been done by Christ.
The moment we begin to think that our lives can in any way give us a head start over someone else or make us better simply because of what we've done, we've missed the whole point of grace.

Yes, there are people whose lives inspire us, and enable us to make choices which reflect both their lives and the life of Jesus, but none of them are any more worthy than anyone else.

Each one of us requires the death of our Lord Jesus to save and redeem us and it is that act that makes people saints.
If your internet is too slow you get a higher speed one. If going into the petrol station takes too long you Pay at the pump!

If writing a letter is too slow, you send an email.
If you can't be bothered to cook, you order in, or you buy something that takes 3 mins in the microwave.

We live in a world of instant gratification. We want it our way right away.
The one thing that we're not very good at in these days is patience.

But on All Saints Day, this is precisely what we confess as Christians: there is an eternal city, a paradise of God, an eternity of rest and a being with the Lord and yet we haven't got it yet...we have to wait.
One of the things that we struggle with as Christians is that we think we should have it all sorted now.
'If only I could be more loving, if only I could be more caring, if only I was more like mother Theresa or St. Peter, St. James or St. Mary then God would love me more and I will stand a better chance of getting to heaven'.

People sometimes say to me I hope I get into heaven, people who I know have a living faith and yet they think they're not good enough, and no there not, but Jesus is, and that's the whole point. Saints are made by God because of what he has done, not us.

We could all do with being a bit better, being more patient, more kind, more loving and forgiving.
Better at sharing our resources, our time, our selves but there is nothing that can or will make God love you any more or any less than he does right now.

If there is anything that can bring a sense of relief it's surely that we don't earn our place as saints in glory.

The book of Ephesians tells us it's by grace that you are saved.

In our gospel reading Jesus says "Blessed are you who are poor, you who are hungry, you who weep, you who are hated, excluded and reviled, because a time is coming when you will be rich, and fed, joyful, included and rejoiced over, because your reward isn't here, it's in heaven. But you have to wait a bit longer..."

On the walls are names of people that we remember today, we might not remember them because they had exemplary lives of self-denial, or miraculous gifts of healing and miracles. We remember them because they were, and are still loved.

Is everyone who dies a saint, no. What makes a saint is someone who has a deep love of Jesus, a devotion to him, and a will to please him in their lives whatever it might involve, like David saints fail, they get it wrong, but they stand again dust themselves off and get on with being a Christian.

In Hebrews 6 we read; "God is not unjust so as to overlook (or forget) your work and the love which you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do."

And so not all saints are dead...