Isaiah 25: 6-9; Revelation 21: 1-6a; John 11: 32-44

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

I have the privilege this year of celebrating the feast of All Saints twice: once on the appointed day itself, when we had a Eucharist here in church for 340 children from St Peter’s School, plus sixty or so adults, and now of course today with all of you on this All Saints Sunday.

At the school service, we did a bit of talking about saints through the ages – mainly, I have to admit, older rather than newer – but we finished with a reminder that St Paul called all of us ‘saints’ too, and to that end we took a selfie of all of us – all the saints present in church that morning.

And so that is sort of where I start this morning. With the thought that saints are not just from hundreds (or more) of years ago, but are present in the world today, both in truly saintly characters like the late Mother Teresa of Calcutta (of whom more later) and in the common or garden saints, the followers of Christ who do our best day in, day out to do what He would have us do, and fail often more than we succeed, but we get up and try again the next day and the one after that too.

And as we think about saints, I would also direct your attention to the stained glass in the church windows. I love that we have some stained glass – which tells stories about God and godly people – but also plain glass – which lets the glory of Creation into the building and helps us to remember that the world and the church belong together and should have those connections between inside and outside. But, yes, stained glass: how does stained glass work – how does it tell its stories? It does it by allowing the light to shine through it, and the same could be said of the saints; that they are human beings who have allowed God’s grace to shine through them and who illuminate God – turn the spotlight on God - by who they are and what they do.

And having said that, I would draw your attention also to the banners of light, here at the front, which the children who came to our Light up the Night evening made. Do please have a closer look after the service. They point up a clear parallel between actual light sources and Jesus the Light of the World – all of which ties in quite beautifully with this thinking about light shining through, whether it be through people or through stained glass windows.

Rowan Williams says of ‘holiness’ that it is not a possession, not something that you can have as such; it is a way of standing in relation to God that enables God’s light and grace to shine through. And so holiness is something that we can all aspire to too.

It was easy, with the children, to focus on saints of ages long past – so we could put together thoughts about symbols – George and the dragon, for example, or St Peter and his keys – because they are already familiar with some of those stories. But if we are to come forward some centuries, we might think about someone like Mother Teresa (of whom more later) or Dorothy Day, who was an American social activist who died in 1980. She worked among the homeless and addicted, and the story goes that one day when a journalist came to the hostel where she was counselling an alcoholic, she asked: so do you want to speak to us, then? Thereby expressing complete solidarity with the homeless alcoholic man and acknowledging his equal humanity with hers.

But she was no pushover. When referred to as a saint by a third party, her somewhat waspish response was: Don’t call me a saint; I don’t want to be dismissed that easily.

She was obviously a woman of soundbites. She also said: I want to live my life in such a way that it wouldn’t make sense without Christ. A challenging statement, and one that I am still trying to unpick. But I sort of think I want to live mine like that too.

And here we stand, as the season of the year changes, and the days get shorter and the nights get longer, but also as I said fairly recently, having reached the end of Ordinary Time, we land in this period of remembering: All Hallows Eve, then All Saints and All Souls and of course Remembrance. And maybe it’s me being fanciful, but I sort of don’t think so – there is a feeling that the veil between heaven and earth somehow gets a bit thinner at this time of year; there is a liminality about this season; a disorientation, a standing on the threshold, that connects us more closely with those we have loved and lost, and those we never knew, than at other times of year. And so maybe it is also a time to explore those deeper questions…

Greg Jones, Dean of Duke Divinity School in the States, says we have lost, along this modern way, a sense of what the future might hold. Not lost hope exactly, but just don’t have the same solidity of hope as people even last century seemed to have. He talks about the world being in a mess – and who would disagree when you look at the shooting of our brother and sister Jews in Pittsburgh a bit over a week ago, and the seemingly constant round of teenage stabbings in London and the ongoing housing crisis in this country. But then he says that surely the Christian gospel has a great deal to speak into those situations; if only we would learn how to communicate it. And those people who do it best are the saints – the people who so radically live out their Christian life, in complete commitment to the service of the poor or the oppressed, or refugees, or whatever cause they have felt called to espouse and support.

I know people like that here in our own community – people who are so completely self-giving that they radically challenge the way the rest of us live our lives. And while I would continue to affirm that all of us are saints, there are still some people who, for whatever reason, manage to reveal to us the thinness of that veil between heaven and earth that I was talking about before. The light is a bit brighter around them; they show us something that is inspirational and challenging to the way in which we live our lives.

And these are the people who are also most likely to raise questions among those people who are not Christians: non-Christians ask: what is going on there? Why are they doing that? and what is their motivation? Profound goodness challenges us all. We want to understand a bit more about it; we want a bit of whatever it is that they have.

But we need to be careful. It is tempting to think about saints in terms of perfection. Clearly we aren’t. Any of us. But when we use the term saint, we do often have in mind those exceptional people I have already made reference to – those who embody goodness in whatever sphere they operate in. Those of profound goodness. And yet. An acquaintance of mine, who went to India as a student and met Mother Teresa, tells me that despite being just up off her sickbed , she greeted this bunch of raggletaggle students like long lost family. However, he also bears witness to the fact that she could be quite curmudgeonly – which is encouraging. 😊

The Christian faith enables us ultimately to understand that God can bring peace to our past, purpose to our present and hope for our future.

May I wish all of you saints the peace, purpose and hope of Christ, today and every day. **Amen**

Postscript - The poet and theologian Malcolm Guite has written about one of the things that brought about his own conversion to Christ. It was in psalm 145, in which the writer repeats the word ‘all’: The LORD is loving to everyone and his compassion is over all his works. All your works praise you, O LORD, and your faithful servants bless you…. The LORD is faithful in all his words and merciful in all his deeds.

And he said this: on the 1st and 2nd of November, the Church has a pair of feasts; All Saints and All Souls, each of which begins with that wonderfully Biblical and inclusive little word All. He describes how each ‘all’ in that psalm seemed to widen the circle of God's love, until he began to wonder if even he might be included in one of those alls..

So in remembrance and celebration of the fact that we are all included, no matter how humble our calling, he wrote a sonnet entitled A Last Beatitude. It goes like this:

And blessèd are the ones we overlook;

The faithful servers on the coffee rota,

The ones who hold no candle, bell or book

But keep the books and tally up the quota,

The gentle souls who come to 'do the flowers',

The quiet ones who organise the fete,

Church sitters who give up their weekday hours,

Doorkeepers who may open heaven’s gate.

God knows the depths that often go unspoken

Amongst the shy, the quiet, and the kind,

Or the slow healing of a heart long broken

Placing each flower so for a year’s mind.

Invisible on earth, without a voice,

In heaven their angels glory and rejoice.