

## Homily for Sunday December 14<sup>th</sup> 2008 (Advent 3B)

### Devotion to the Saints and Prayer for the Dead

Today I want to look at two separate, but related, aspects of Catholic devotion, namely veneration of the saints and prayer for the dead.

Even in our contemporary society, which is often so indifferent or hostile to Christianity, the saints form a part of our lives. If we want to visit the great sights of London, we cannot miss out the Cathedral dedicated to St. Paul; if we want to catch a train to the continent, we must catch it at St. Pancras Station; our local hospital is named after St. Richard, our local hospice after St. Wilfrid; the different nations that make up our United Kingdom mark their own culture on the feast days of St. Patrick, St. David, St. George and St. Andrew. For most people these saints may be just names, words, labels, but they are a sign to us of just how deeply the lives of the saints who have gone before us have impressed themselves onto our lives.

Why, then, should we bother with the saints? Are they not just like any other people who have lived and died, what is special about them? In one sense, of course, they are exactly that. The saints were born sinners, like the rest of us; they come from a wide variety of backgrounds; they were certainly not born perfect, and many of them came to sanctity only after lives of weakness and self-indulgence. We look at them as they were in later life once their holiness began to be clear to all, but we fail to see the struggles, and the battles against temptation, and all the difficulties and trials that they went through on the way there; we read about their wise words and their courageous actions, but we do not see the times of doubt, and fear, and weakness. This is the first thing that we must realise about the saints: they were not born perfect, they achieved holiness because they co-operated with the power of God to change and renew live. The saints are important because they show us that, through God's grace, it is possible for ordinary people to become holy. So they are a source of hope and inspiration. When we venerate the saints, we are always praising God for his glory, not these individuals themselves. In a sense all holiness belongs to God - the saints are vessels of holiness, they are clear and untarnished containers that shine with the holiness of God.

It is still the case that, to be canonised (a process by which the Church recognises that someone is already a saint, not the Church making them a saint) there must be two miracles brought about by the intercession of that saint: someone has asked them to intervene, and from their place in Heaven they have done so. On one level, this merely demonstrates that they must be in Heaven, in order to work miracles, so they must be a saint; but it also shows that they still take an interest in their sisters and brothers on earth, it is a sign of connectedness, of their being a part of the family of Christians that exists by virtue of baptism regardless of the constraints of time and space. In addition, these miracles show that we stand in continuity with the Church of the New Testament: the miracles of the New Testament show that in various ways at different times the Kingdom of God - that is to say a way of existence where everything is as it was created to be - breaks into our fallen world with great power. So, we should not be too surprised if, at unpredictable times and in ways we cannot always understand, the power of God breaks through at the intercession of the saints.

All this seems rather general; there are so many saints, I cannot learn about them all. Where should I begin? I think the best place to start is with the saints that have some particular connection to us, the ones with whom we feel some affinity. What are our local connections with the saints? We have an altar in Petworth dedicated to St. Joseph, who is amongst other things the patron saint of the dying: so this is a good place to go and pray for the dying or the dead, as by long tradition Joseph died in the arms of Mary and Jesus. Duncton has two patrons, George, who is also one of the patron saints of soldiers, and Anthony, who is the patron saint of many things, including fishermen (He once preached to the fish). We would do well to begin by learning about these saints, and asking them to help us with their prayers. We celebrate their feasts with special masses because they are our patrons, and they are a part of our local church community - they are our own. More immediate even than them are the lives of the men and women who walked the same streets as us. The Sussex countryside is rich in saints. Blessed Thomas Percy, the Earl of Northumberland, who was beheaded in 1572, lived here in Petworth. Elizabeth was on the throne, and because of his support for the Catholic faith Percy had to withdraw from public life to this quiet Sussex town. Along the A272 in Cowdray Blessed

Margaret Pole was imprisoned; St. Richard lived in Chichester, and on the heath just north of the city two other priests were martyred in 1588, while the Midhurst born Thomas Bullaker was put to death in the reign of Charles I. These are our brothers and sisters, our people, our saints.

In summary, the saints show us that with God's help holiness is open to all; they also show that the saints still take in interest in the church on earth, and come to our help with their prayers - St Therese famously said "I will spend my Heaven doing good on Earth".

We are not, however, all saints. There are those who shine so brightly with the glory of God that they quickly make their way to Heaven. But most of us find ourselves far from ready for Heaven at the hour of our death. We would feel hopelessly out of place, hopelessly inadequate, hopelessly unworthy. So we need to feel the healing power of God's love, the love that burns away all that is self-indulgent, sinful and destructive in what we call purgatory. While I am there, I can still benefit from the prayers of those who are left behind. When we pray for the dead we are praying that they will be made ready for Heaven quickly, that the transformation into the perfect image of Christ will soon be complete, that the unfinished business of life may swiftly be resolved. It is one of the glories of our Catholic faith that no-one is beyond the mercy of God except those who wish to be, and when we pray for the dead we are playing our part in re-aligning things, in making things as they should be: if someone offended me on earth - or indeed if I offended them - but now I settle down to pray for them, that has in some way undone the sin, untied the knot of evil, and played a part in that person's purification. This is what the Pope has to say about this subject.

*"Now a further question arises: if "Purgatory" is simply purification through fire in the encounter with the Lord, Judge and Saviour, how can a third person intervene, even if he or she is particularly close to the other? When we ask such a question, we should recall that no man is an island, entire of itself. Our lives are involved with one another, through innumerable interactions they are linked together. No one lives alone. No one sins alone. No one is saved alone. The lives of others continually spill over into mine: in what I think, say, do and achieve. And conversely, my life spills*

*over into that of others: for better and for worse. So my prayer for another is not something extraneous to that person, something external, not even after death. In the interconnectedness of Being, my gratitude to the other—my prayer for him—can play a small part in his purification. ... It is never too late to touch the heart of another, nor is it ever in vain." (Spe Salvi 48)*

When I give up my time to pray for the dead, even (perhaps especially) when I pray for the forgotten dead, those who no-one remembers, I add to the stock of human goodness in the world, and this contributes to their purification. When I have a mass said for someone, or for the Holy Souls in general, I make a sacrifice of my time and my funds which I unite to the sacrifice of Christ. The offering I make to the priest does not in any way 'buy' the fruits of that mass, or buy salvation for the dead, but it is a small sacrifice that I make which links me to the sacrifice of Christ: the fact that I am prepared to make a sacrifice once more adds to the stock of human goodness and helps in the purification of the Holy Souls. As the Pope says "It is never too late to touch the heart of another" and when I am in purgatory the fact that you take the trouble to pray for me touches my heart, and plays a part in making me whole and pure and ready for Heaven.

Every Sunday, and in fact at every mass, we celebrate the glorious and wonderful resurrection of Christ which conquered death for ever. In the saints we see that power alive and active; in our prayer for the dead we have the chance to make the resurrection of Christ real for others.