

Homily for The Solemnity of All Saints 2009

All Saints Day is a day of rejoicing, a day when we turn our minds to Heaven. On this day we think of all the holy men and women who have gone before us, and we celebrate with them because now they are enjoying the glory of Heaven; they are enjoying that happiness, that wonder, that peace, that comes from knowing that all is well, that everything is as it should be. These people who we celebrate today, this huge number of people, most of whose names and faces are unknown to us, come from every background and every walk of life. The people we rejoice with today include bishops who have fearlessly proclaimed the truth; priests who have exhausted themselves caring for their people; religious who have given up their lives to serve the poor; they also include people who have lost their lives because they refused to compromise the truth, refused to exchange the glory of God for a tawdry worthless fake; they also include ordinary people, mothers and fathers who have devoted themselves to caring for their children, workers who have tried to make the world a little more honest, a little more decent, a little more authentic; they include people whose lives have gone almost entirely unnoticed, but who in their own way have done something to shape the world into something like the Kingdom of Heaven. Every one of them has a different story, and none of them will be exactly like us, but all the same they are our brothers and sisters, and there is nothing that the saints want more than that we should join them. That is why their example is set out for us to follow, and why they are urging us on with their prayers.

What is so special about the saints, what can we see in their lives that sets them apart from the rest? Well, we are all on our way to becoming saints, that is the calling of every Christian, but there are some things that we can pick out as characteristics of those who have their eyes most firmly set on Heaven.

The saints are people who can see clearly. Their clarity of vision enables them to see the world as it really is. It is always quite tempting to see the world in simple, black and white terms, where what you see is what you get and nothing truly has any real depth of meaning. The secular view is that nothing matters, all things are disposable, they are merely instruments that I use on my passage through life; the Catholic view

is that everything matters, that all the things, and most especially the people, around me have great significance; they all have a great place in God's plan. The saints resist the temptation to look at the world around me as my playground, a place for me to use as I please; they see it as a wonderful unity, something created by God in which I have my place, but my place is not at the centre. This is something that the author George Weigel describes as 'the habit of seeing things in depth, as they are and for what they are'. He links this ability to see clearly with our being equipped for Heaven.

"Everything that is, is for a reason. Everything that happens, happens for a purpose. That's what it means to understand history as His-story. Seeing things in their true dimensions is one very large part of what it means to be a Catholic. For learning to see things aright here is how we become the kind of people who can see, and love, God for ever". (Letters to a Young Catholic p. 18)

St John, in the second reading, says much the same when he says that once we see God clearly, once we are able to see reality undistorted by sin and pride, we shall be able to become more like him - indeed that will be the deepest desire of our heart.

Every saint realises that there can be no holiness without passing under the shadow of the cross. For some of them, the shadow of the cross will loom very large because they have to face up to real suffering, even death, to keep safe the spark of God that is within them. For others, life is unmarked by the danger of violence, but all the same sainthood and holiness always involve an element of self-sacrifice. For every saint, and indeed for every Christian, there is the realisation that what I want to do and what I ought to do are not the same. One of the great weaknesses of a society stripped of its religious heart, and the reason why societies that have turned their back on religion never survive, is that there is no way of knowing what I ought to do except what I decide for myself, and what I decide for myself is always, and inevitably, tarnished by selfishness and desire. The saints understand this, and they are prepared to say that the ultimate decider of what they should do lies outside them; it is God's will, not theirs, that really matters, and sometimes this will mean they must refuse to do things that they really want, because it is right to do so. No-one who always did exactly what he wanted ever amounted to very much. The saints are people who were prepared to accept that being prepared to make sacrifices is essential to real human living.

There is, then, something heroic about sainthood, in the sense that it requires me to accept that my comfort and security are not the essential factors that govern all my decisions. For some saints, a small minority, this is manifested in great deeds, heroic grand gestures, but for most the heroism is much more about daily faithfulness in little things. I was listening to a discussion on the Today Programme on Friday about heroism, a discussion that was inspired by the story of 'Sully' Sullenberger, the pilot who landed his plane on The Hudson River in January with 155 people on board after both engines were destroyed by a flock of geese. He declined to accept the title hero, although he very graciously said that he didn't want to diminish the gratitude that people showed him, but he went on to say that he was lucky this happened to him when he was 57, so that he had a whole lot of experience to draw on. He cared about what he did and he had committed himself to becoming an expert at it, so that in a sense his whole working life was a preparation for that three and a half minutes in the sky over New York. In fact, this is something common to many people who do exceptional things, this sense that somehow their whole lives have been a preparation for that moment. To some extent, then, heroism is something that we can acquire, that we can train ourselves for. This is exactly what the saints have done, because the things they do and say which so inspire us do not exist in a vacuum, they are the fruit of a life lived in the presence of God. The martyr will give their life for Christ because they have come to know, and love, and treasure him throughout many years; but in just the same way, much smaller acts of self-sacrifice stem from being friends of Christ. Our daily faithfulness to prayer and our weekly fidelity to Sunday mass are the basic training that prepare us and equip us for those moments of decision when we are put to the test.

Today the saints invite us to their party. It is awesome and exciting to see what they have done. We are invited to join them at God's table, to eat and drink with them. We do not deserve to be there, we have not earned it, but God can see that within each of us lies a saint in the making. At this mass we sit beside the saints as their equals, and we go back to our daily lives determined that we will pick up something of their holiness, that with God's grace we will one day be found worthy to join them for eternity.