

Readings:

Revelation 7: 9-17

1 John 3: 1-3

Matthew 5:1-12

Who are the Saints?

I think you need some exercise – put your hand up if you think you are a saint.

We've had a letter from St Paul. It begins: 'Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, to the church of God at Immanuel and St Andrew in Streatham, to those called to be saints.' We haven't, of course, had such a letter – we don't need one because we can share in all those letters Paul wrote to the various churches and which are in our bibles. But that's how Paul began most of his letters – he announced himself, and who the letter was addressed to – including describing them as saints. Look at the letters to the church in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi and Colossae. They are all addressed to the saints.

Paul's letters were written to be read to all the members of these churches – so that means everyone is a saint. Not just the leaders or a chosen few, but all the members, whether they'd been there right from the beginning or just joined this week. Paul clearly believed that everyone who is a member of the church, who has been baptised, is called to be a saint. It's not just the spiritual high-flyers, some kind of special elite – it's everyone. If Paul believed that then so should we. So we'd better be clear what Paul means by what it is to be a saint, and what that means for us.

It can't be emphasised enough that all the members of the church community are called by God through baptism. They are all set apart from the world for the service of God – they are all called to be holy, which is the English equivalent of the word *agioi* – the word translated as saints. I say they – I should say we. This is about us just as much as it is about the people Paul was actually writing to.

Being set apart from the world doesn't mean living a cloistered life away from the rest of the world. It means knowing that our relationship with God determines the way we see the world, life and everything that happens. The world, certainly in Paul's thinking, is the place where all too often God gets ignored. God's holy people, the saints, put God first and the world second. This was particularly demanding in Paul's time when all Roman citizens were required to worship the Emperor and give their allegiance to him. The call to put God first meant that all Christians were at risk of being seen as traitors and liable to persecution. We don't have that challenge, but we are still called to put God first which means our morals and ethical standards must reflect God's law, not the standards of the society we live in. It means being different from the world so that we can make a difference.

We are called to serve God as people of the new covenant established by Jesus through his death and resurrection – of which the bread and wine we share each week are the sign. A covenant brings obligations which we must follow if we are to represent God rightly in the world. Those who belong to God follow his ways and serve him in the world. They – we – try to make a difference, to bring God's presence into the situations we find ourselves in, and to make God a reality for those who don't yet know him – to help people know that God loves them no matter what.

November 5th 2017 – All Saints' Day

God is the one who calls people to be the church everywhere and throughout history into one community – the community and communion of the saints – all those who respond to his call. And in the Apostles' creed, which we sometimes use, we say we believe in the communion of saints – this great community of all those who belong to God, the great multitude seen by John in his vision as we heard in our first reading.

And we are a community – called by God to be the body of Christ – remember what I said a few weeks ago about being part of the vine. Through baptism we are made one with Christ and with one another so that together we are his body alive and at work in the world today. Apart from Christ we can do nothing – it is only in him that we can be fed and strengthened to do the work he has called us to. And he has promised that as we live in him so he will live in us and give us the power of the Holy Spirit to enable us to become saints – the holy people of God set apart to serve him in the world. We've had a series of sermons on discipleship – disciples are saints – people living day by day in the power of the Spirit trying to make God present to the world around us.

According to Paul the people who live faithfully, trying to live out their calling day by day, are the saints, the *agioi*, the holy ones. Jesus uses a different word – blessed. As we heard in our gospel reading – a familiar passage often called the Beatitudes – that sets out clearly the way to live as God's people. Some translations use the word happy rather than blessed, but I don't think that gets to the heart of what Jesus means. If you live as Jesus teaches, you will be more than happy – you will share in God's *shalom* – his blessing and peace that comes from living as he requires. This is how God's holy people are called to live.

You might think that the way Jesus puts these sayings bears little relationship to how we live now. What does it mean to hunger and thirst for righteousness? Or that the meek will inherit the earth? So I've given you a hand-out with the beatitudes updated for today. The first thing to notice is that unlike Jesus' version, for each sentence about the blessed there is a matching one for those who are **unblessed** or blighted. In other words what life is like for those who refuse the invitation of God to share in his life and follow the way of the saints. People who are negative, people who make situations worse, instead of making God present. People who harbour a grudge, people who are mean and self-centred, people who allow bad experiences to colour everything they think and do – they are the ones who live as if God wasn't there and makes no difference to life. And they don't share in God's *shalom* – they don't know his blessing.

If we're honest some of those things do sometimes apply to us, no matter how hard we try to live Jesus' way – we are human and sometimes we get it wrong. I know when I read this for the first time I felt I was looking in a mirror. Please take this hand-out home and read it – and think about where it challenges you. Think about what it means to be one of God's holy people – those who bear his presence because he lives in them, endeavouring always to be in harmony with him.

Being a saint is about trying to get it right. Getting it wrong is often the easy way – it's much easier to look after your own interests rather than worrying too much about others. It's much easier to hang on to your money than to give some away and not enough for that new iPhone. Jesus never promised an easy ride – in fact he promised pain and hardship, which is definitely what St Paul experienced as he pointed out a number of times to his readers. As I may have mentioned before, the Christian life is cross-shaped and it takes effort and commitment, as well as the giving up of self

November 5th 2017 – All Saints' Day

to allow the Holy Spirit to work in us – and that can be a struggle – to let go of self and to let God. It takes a willingness to make yourself vulnerable and to get hurt in order to help others find God.

It's a struggle and so we all need encouragement – that is something very important that we can all do for one another. Paul stressed it in his letters – urging his readers to encourage one another, but also telling them how much he was encouraged by what he heard about them from his various colleagues as they travelled around the churches. We can encourage each other by sharing answers to prayer, by things that have happened that have helped us grow in faith, and by taking an interest in what each of us doing – our hard-working junior church leaders need encouragement – when did you last ask one of them how it's going? There are lots of jobs which need to be done each week mainly unseen – the people who do them need to be encouraged and not taken for granted – those who arrange the flowers, those who count the money after the service, and many others. We all need to encourage one another.

A little later in the service we will receive God's holy gifts for God's holy people, in the bread and wine of communion. God's holy people – that's us – are the saints that God has called to serve him here at Immanuel, seen or unseen. It's through that struggle day by day that as God's holy people, his saints – the reality of living God's way takes hold of us and we are gradually transformed into the people God wants us to be. Paul tells us that the bit we couldn't do for ourselves – being made right with God – our justification – has been done for us by Jesus through his death and resurrection. Our sanctification – our becoming fully the person God wants us to be takes a lifetime's work to complete and is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. In the meantime we are still, each of us a holy person, a saint, even if it doesn't always feel like it. Even so, while we're on the way, we should think of ourselves as saints – God's holy people – set apart to serve him in the world, to know him and to make him known.

So, now – who thinks they are a saint?

To God be the glory. Amen.

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