



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Commemoration of All Saints, Trinity XXIV, November 6th, 2016

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

Anglicans tend to let saints fend for themselves. Our saints aren't canonized in the way it is done in the Roman Church. Our saints are canonized by acclaim. They are accounted saints because the faithful hail them as saints. It's a bit loosey goosey, of course. Someone who is a saint to you isn't necessarily a saint to me.

In any event, the saints we are celebrating today are not ones with feast days in the Church calendar. In fact, most of us probably wouldn't recognize them as saints at all. The saints we are remembering today are ordinary folk – mom, dad, grandma, grandpa, Great Aunt Eileen and Mr. & Mrs. Johnson who lived next door.

The British Church has observed November 1st as the Feast of All Saints since the 8th Century. But, unlike the Roman Church, the Anglicans aren't celebrating major saints like the Apostles and the four Evangelists, whose days are in the BCP or the various sacramentaries. Today we give thanks for the little guys – the host of rank and file Christians who passed the faith on to us.

Anglicans, you see, never lost the Apostolic Church's habit of speaking about all faithful Christians as "saints." St. Paul does so in his epistles. Take II Corinthians 1:1: "Paul, an apostle of God, and Timothy our brother, unto the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints which are in all Achaia."

This isn't an eccentricity. He referred to ordinary, living Christians as "saints" throughout his epistles. So did St. Jude, St. James, St. Peter and St. John, both in his epistles and the Book of Revelation. The Apostolic Church, you see, lived cheek by jowl with saints. The martyrs were friends and neighbors. Back

then professing Christianity was an exceedingly dangerous thing to do. Ordination was tantamount to a death sentence. Not one of the first 17 Bishops of Rome died in bed. All were martyred for the Faith.

The Early Church knew saints weren't plaster saints – but red blooded, living and breathing human beings. They knew that in some aspects of their lives, at least, saints tend not to be entirely saintly. Peter was a bit of a blow hard. Jesus called James and John "the sons of Thunder" because they had such terrible tempers.

Saint Jerome, who, in the Third Century AD, translated The Bible into Latin was continually falling out with his friends and writing them nasty letters. St. Columba who converted Scotland to Christianity was shipped off there from Ireland as a penance because he had started a war that cost many good men their lives.

St. Francis of Assisi was a fast living young tear-away when he received his call to a holy life. "Francis," a vision of the risen Jesus Christ told him, "I want you to rebuild my Church." His call to holiness did not initially enhance either his sense of honesty or his commonsense.

Close by his family home was an old, tumbledown church that had long been out of use. His father was a wealthy merchant and Francis decided our Lord was asking him to raid his father's warehouse and sell the stolen stock to refurbish the ancient building.

His father was, naturally, furious and it apparently took a long lecture from one of the local priests to convince Francis that when Jesus asked you to do something he expected you to use your own resources, not resources filched from other people.

Life with Francis didn't get any easier after he had grasped the meaning of Jesus' call – that God wanted him to rebuild the whole church by forming a new religious order embodying a true sense piety, self-sacrifice and service to all people, especially the poor.

The bishop who ordained him deacon was thunderstruck when, immediately after he had laid his episcopal hands on him, Francis stripped naked, saying he was fulfilling his vow of poverty. To avoid scandal, the bishop hastily wrapped him in his cope.

Francis took his vows of poverty quite literally – to an exasperating degree. He and his brothers habitually dressed in sackcloth and when the brothers begged him for Psalters so they might sing the psalms, he refused. "If you get Psalters, the next thing you'll want is prayer books," he explained,

Francis is unique only in his literal interpretation of his vow of poverty. All saints tend to share the single-mindedness of purpose that made him so hard to live with – some, like him for a life time; others for a momentary act of heroic self-sacrifice.

This explains why – instead of some stirring apostolic adventure – the Gospel reading for today is comprised of the opening verses of St. Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount: specifically the passage known as the Beatitudes: "Blessed in the Poor in Spirit, etc."

One might be tempted to explain the selection of this reading by assuming that in the Beatitudes, Jesus lays down God's qualifications for sainthood. After all, it doesn't seem entirely unreasonable to expect Christian saints to be humble and meek, punctilious about prayer and fasting, merciful, pure in heart, peace-loving and righteous in the best sense of the word.

In reality, however, few of us possess all of the virtues described in the Beatitudes. Few of us can honestly be described as meek. Humility doesn't come easy either. In fact, most people who are genuinely humble have had it thrust upon them. Besides, self-righteousness is not at all the sort of righteousness Jesus is talking about.

But if we lack most of the virtues Jesus outlines in the Sermon on the Mount, how can possibly celebrate All Saints Day as the Feast Day of Ordinary People? The answer is that when Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, he wasn't so much talking about

standards of holiness that human beings can aspire to achieve. He was actually discussing God's standards of holiness.

The purpose of the Sermon on the Mount is not so much to tell us how to make ourselves holy, but to explain to why we so badly need Jesus as our redeemer – to pay the price for our inability to live up to God's standards.

Indeed, Jesus examples are very frightening. He says, for instance, we might congratulate ourselves because we have managed to go through life without cheating on our spouses. But that's no great achievement by God's standards. God is so incredibly holy, that, measured against his standards, anybody who ever had even a fleeting thought about cheating is as guilty as someone who has actually done the deed.

People who get divorced, and without quibbling give their spouses a settlement with all that is legally required, shouldn't congratulate themselves on their decency and generosity. God only permits divorce in the first place because human beings are generally unkind, uncharitable and unforgiving. You get the picture.

The bad news is that none of us, not even the most saintly among us, has any hope of living up to God's standards. The good news is that the Christian faith always brings good news. Saints have become saints in spite of their shortcomings, and not necessarily because they triumphed over them. We become saints when we face up to our faults and flaws, repent them, and recognize the need to cultivate virtues to offset them.

In reminding us of God's standards of holiness, today's Gospel is prompting us to recognize not our strengths, but our faults and flaws. For it is only by recognizing our weaknesses that we can begin cultivate the virtues we need to help us on our way towards that modest degree of sainthood God seeks of us.

The Feast of All Saints is much more than a celebration of those who have gone before. It is, in fact, a spiritual birthday party for all Christians. So I'll wish you many happy returns. *AMEN.*

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.