

All Saints

30 October 2022

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Daniel 7.1-3,15-18

Ephesians 1.11-end

Luke 6.20-31

Which Kingdom?

For sometime in the early years of being a Christian I worshipped in a church that had had personal experience of Janani Luwum. Janani Luwum would be spoken of occasionally with a sense of admiration and affection. I had never heard of the man.

I learned that he had been the Archbishop of the Church of Uganda at the time of Idi Amin. He had spoken out about the brutal excesses of Amin and had been murdered on Amin's orders. He died at the age of fifty five in 1977.

In 1998, Janani Luwum was commemorated with ten other martyrs of the twentieth century with a statue above Great West Door of Westminster Abbey.

The town of Saint Albans remembers the first British martyr. Alban was a Roman soldier of the third or fourth century who was converted by a Christian priest whom he then sheltered. The Roman authorities then executed Alban because of his faith and actions.

The town of Bury St. Edmonds is named after King Edmond who was King of the East Angles in the ninth century. He was killed by the Vikings and was the patron saint of the English for some four centuries until Saint George was chosen by Edward the third in 1350.

Today we celebrate the feast of All Saints and the great mark of being a saint is having been a martyr. It is the ultimate testimony that God comes first. Europe has enormous numbers of towns and cities named after Saints. Usually there is very little know about them except that they died for their faith. In doing so they were making a declaration against the ways of the world they live in. There was a famous saying going back to Tertullian in the third century that the 'The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.'

These people who died were marked as peaceful, honourable and undeserving of death. In their way they fit with the struggle touched on in our reading for the book of Daniel. There is a world that is in rebellion against God and God's ways are

promoted by people of faith, sometimes in the most courageous and costly ways.

Many types of saints

The Reformed expression of the Christian Faith has had some reaction against saints. It was felt that there was a huge catalogue of people too many of which had some rather dubious stories. In addition they could be venerated too enthusiastically and at the worst obscure a direct relationship with God.

And yet the saints are people to pay serious attention to because they reveal truth about God and patterns of life that we can follow. There are the saints of the Bible. Our own church is dedicated to Saint Mary. There are Jesus' disciples along with many other followers of Christ, not least Saint Paul. All of whom who have shared their faith in ways that live on. A few weeks ago we learned somethings about Saint Francis of Assisi. Not all of these people are martyrs.

In our reading from Ephesians there was the use of the word saint that was almost a badge of membership. Saint Paul wrote 'I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints'. He is talking about ordinary practicing Christians. The word saint is from sanctity. It is a person who is considered holy and this is the calling to all people who believe.

When the word saint is used only for people of truly exceptional lives we can be left with a false idea of who is in and who is out. One of the great words particularly in the Anglican tradition is that of common. What is common in our wider society can often be despised as having nothing to celebrate and be rather boring. But Jesus himself seemed to mix very happily with the common people he felt each of them particularly the excluded should know that God loves them.

Jesus gave a lavish invitation but this was not just as it were lowering the bar so any old rascal could get in. Jesus offered forgiveness, told people to sin no more and follow him.

It is not just that we can think holiness is for great saints but to miss the point of what holiness is about as well.

Jesus' Holiness

Quite often people will think of holiness being about what you do. For Jesus it seemed more about who you are and in particular being a child of God. Jesus would speak about action not least

because the religious world of his day had a lot to say about rules. But Jesus seemed to give value in a very wild and extravagant way particularly to those who thought they hadn't got any value. Jesus' holiness was about welcome, establishing relationship and quite often simply forgiving people and allowing them to start again. Jesus sort of trusted that when people knew they were loved they would want to do loving things. These loving things were not to be paraded around or worn as badges of honour because you had a secure identity. In this way Jesus was magnetically attractive to very many people and very threatening to those who sought to want to blame and exclude people.

I can remember some months ago asking in a sermon whether we wake up in the morning and want to be holy all day. the question was deliberately set up as a bit potty. But if holiness is about seeking a day where you know you are precious and wanting other people to share in the delights you have received then being holy does not seem so daft.

Using words such as holiness or saint will probably require some sort of explanation in our day and age. But may I ask who are the people who led you to understand love? Who are the people who opened a door of hope when you have felt despair? Who have you known who changed your view of God so that you no longer think of someone austere or irrelevant. All these things are about admirable people whom we are pleased to know. If that is sainthood it sounds good to me.

There have been many such people I have known but one that always springs to mind is a senior manager when I was working as an engineer. He had a confident sense of humility. He spoke with clarity about his faith and presented me with challenges that made sense and were worth stepping up to. Some years ago when I had a period of study leave I caught up with him after a gap of some 25 years. He had the same graciousness and excitement to learn more about his faith. We shared a very joyful day together.

Being faithful

So let me ask on this feast of All Saints how are we going to be faithful? Let's avoid the challenge to be a saint or to be holy, but in a way that's what I'm talking about. Having discovered the life of God how are we going to continue to grow?

In our reading from Luke's Gospel Jesus says we will be blessed and I take it that means a life given as a gift. But Jesus says will find it in unusual places such as poverty or hunger or with tears. I'm sure it can also be better but if we hit rock bottom Jesus says a blessed life is still possible. Trust, believe and be faithful.

In that passage Jesus doesn't underplay that it might be difficult. People may hate us. There are false comforts such as wealth. There are great challenges like loving enemies and being generous. But be faithful.

Now none of this is about martyrdom and it is unlikely in our society that experience will come to us. None of this is about high renown. We are to be comfortable with being common. In another place Jesus said the Kingdom of God is like finding treasure buried in a field. So wake up each day and expect in the here and now things to be wonderful.

You probably know I really like Paul's letter to the Philippians and as he draws the letter to a close he says:

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. Philippians 4.8,9

I wonder what leaps out at you. I can remember when I first read it that lovely long list of qualities to make life sing. There is so much to look out for to embrace share and celebrate. I know that is not all. as I said earlier, there may be poverty hunger or tears.

What leaps out at me now is that Paul says beloved. We are to know we are precious. What leaps out to be now is that the God of peace will be with us. God treasures us like a good parent who knows about the meaning of life so that it is well ordered and good. We believe in a creator who made human life and then declared it is very good.

So let us set our sights on holiness living as saints, prepared to interpret those words so that they don't sound odd or arrogant and to be faithful, because the goodness of God is offered to us and does not come to an end.