

All Saints

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 1st November 2020 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Psalm 34, Revelation 7:7-19

Introduction: what is a saint?

Think of a saint - someone "officially" described as such, or someone you know of.

What makes this person "saintly"?

You may have thought of a saint from the Bible, or someone from the middle ages such as St Francis or Julian of Norwich, or of someone more recent who is well-known, such as Mother Teresa, or of someone you know personally who lives a particularly holy or selfless life.

To be canonised as a saint in the Roman Catholic Church you need not only to have led a holy life but to have performed 2 miracles, either during your lifetime, or after your death in response to prayers that people made to you. All of this makes being a saint seem rather out of reach of ordinary, fallible human beings like you and me.

But let's look at the word more closely.

- The English word *saint* comes from the Latin *sanctus*, meaning *holy*.
- In the Old Testament the word used is *qādōsh*, meaning *sacred* or *set apart for God*. It's used in Psalm 34:9 "O fear the LORD, you his holy ones".
- In the New Testament the word used is *hagios*, with the same meaning. It comes several times in the Book of Revelation.¹

The most important thing about being a saint is that you are set apart for God – which is partly about God calling us to serve him and partly about us responding to that call and dedicating our lives to him. We don't need to be perfect to be saintly. We just need to let God's light shine through us, whatever our imperfections may be.

- *Living a life that is "set apart" for God means that you reflect God's light in the world.* It's a bit like when Paul wrote that we are like clay pots holding God's treasure. So we can all be saints if we want to.

The righteous

Actually, the word for saint isn't used very much in the Old Testament. Instead, there are lots of references to "the righteous", who are contrasted with "the wicked". Essentially, the righteous show reverence for God and follow God's ways; they do what is right and just, whereas the wicked follow their own desires and disobey God's laws. In the Old Testament, how you live is a sign of your relationship

¹ Revelation 8:3-4, 11:18, 13:7,10, 16:6, 17:6, 18:20,24, 19:8, 20:9

with God. And God, for his part, looks after the righteous and rewards them, even if for a time they may have to suffer. Psalm 34:19 says

Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
but the LORD rescues them from them all.

The wicked may seem to be getting away with their wickedness, but ultimately God will act righteously and punish the wicked, while rewarding the righteous.

Facing suffering

This may all seem a bit academic if life is going smoothly for you. But when life is hard and everything seems to be against you, the need for God to act and protect those who belong to him comes into sharp focus. This was the situation facing the Christians for whom the book of Revelation was written. They lived in seven cities in the Roman province of Asia, which we would now call western Turkey. Some of them had already faced persecution from Roman authorities, and there was more persecution ahead.

In fact, from the time of the emperor Nero in the 60's AD until the emperor Constantine embraced Christianity in 312 AD, the church faced a rollercoaster of persecution on and off, with many thousands being imprisoned, tortured and killed for their faith. The Roman State was, in principle, happy for people to practise any religion they chose, provided that they were willing to swear loyalty to the State. And the way you were expected to show that loyalty was to burn incense to the Emperor as a god. That was something Christians were not prepared to do. They were often given an ultimatum: burn the incense or be killed – perhaps with the sword, or by being burned to death or thrown to the wild beasts in the arena.

The book of Revelation portrays the totalitarian State as a beast whose power comes from Satan, who is portrayed as a great red dragon – as shown in the St Michael window in the west wall of our church building. In John's visions everyone is required to worship the Beast and to carry his mark on their foreheads and hands. The Beast holds not just political power but economic power, reflecting the real situation in the Roman Empire where Rome's demand for food, slaves and luxuries was met from all corners of the Empire, stimulating economic growth and boosting the profits of traders. Those who disagreed with its ideology and unjust practices had no possibility of changing things. Their best hope was to live within the system and keep the faith while trying to avoid compromising what they believed in.

Who are these?

Which brings us to our passage from Revelation:

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.

The scene is God's throne-room in heaven, which was first described in chapters 4 & 5, where all the angelic beings were worshipping God and the Lamb that had been

slain, that is, Jesus. Now we see a vast crowd of people from race and every part of the world, joining in the worship. Who are they? One of the heavenly elders explains:

“These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.²”

Now I am very wary of trying to give a definitive explanation of anything in the book of Revelation, as it is written in poetic language and uses symbolism and references from all over the Old Testament. It is clear, however, that these are people who have died after going through “the great ordeal”. The context of John’s original readers, and the context of the rest of the vision, indicates that the ordeal in mind is persecution for their faith. They are described as having been cleansed from their sins by the death of Christ, or as it is poetically put, “they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”. The verses that follow describe how these people will no longer suffer from hunger, thirst or heat, but will be like sheep led by their shepherd to fresh water. You may be reminded of Psalm 23 here. But it is also an almost word-for-word reference to a prophecy in Isaiah chapter 49, where the prophet refers to the consolation of God’s people who will return from exile in Babylon. Isaiah says:

They shall feed along the ways;
on all bare heights shall be their pasture;
they shall not hunger or thirst,
neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them,
for he who has pity on them will lead them,
and by springs of water will guide them.³

Here in Revelation chapter 7 it is the Lamb of God, Jesus, who will be their shepherd, and John adds that “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes”, which is a quote from Isaiah 25:8, and is repeated in Revelation 21:4.

The essence of the message is this: God sees the suffering of his people, and will one day bring them to be with him in heaven, where they will be free from suffering, where God himself will wipe away their tears like a mother comforting her child, and where Jesus, the Lamb of God, will care for them and refresh them like a shepherd caring for his sheep.

We in this country are not experiencing the kind of persecution that John’s original hearers were facing under the Roman empire. But I believe that God makes us the same promise that he made to the Jews returning from exile in Babylon and to the Church persecuted by the Roman authorities: there will be an end to whatever ordeal, whatever suffering we may have to pass through, and we will one day come to a place of refreshment and peace in God’s loving presence.

² Revelation 7:14

³ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#). (2016). (Is 49:9–10). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

And our response to God's work of salvation and restoration will be the same as that of the white-robed crowd in the throne-room of heaven in Revelation – to worship God and to give him praise, honour and thanks with all of our being.

What does this mean for us?

John is given a glimpse of the saints in glory to share with his seven churches, and with us and all Christians down the ages, in order to encourage us. Life may be tough now, but the end is in sight, and the reward for keeping the faith will be glorious. In chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation, each of the letters to the seven churches ends with a promise for “those who conquer” or, to put it another way, whose faith enables them to persevere and overcome whatever evils are put in our way.

In other words, hold on to God, keep trusting him and obeying him, don't give up, don't be sidetracked by distractions in the world or intimidated by opposition. Remember your first love for God, remember that your robes have been washed in the blood of the Lamb, that Jesus died for you, that he has promised you a place in heaven. Remember who you are in Christ, and shine with his light in the world!

Although we've been thinking about poetic descriptions of life after death, being a saint is a very down-to-earth thing, and it is for ordinary people like you and me. So I'd like to finish by playing you a short video about an ordinary woman who lives out her faith by supporting the work of Tearfund, a Christian aid agency which works with poor people throughout the world to empower them to improve their lives and their communities. She is an inspiration, but she says that she is inspired by the people she has met through Tearfund. For me, this film says that whoever we may be, we can make a positive difference for God in the world.

Play 3-minute film about Val, a 70-year-old weightlifter who supports Tearfund.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o7CR4bQ18L0>

Conclusion

“Who are these?” was the question about the vast crowd dressed in white, worshipping before God's throne in heaven. We've seen that saints are those whose lives are dedicated to serving God and shining with his light in the world. Perhaps we make our own response to that question in the words of that traditional song:

O Lord, I want to be in that number
When the saints go marching in.