

ALL SAINTS' SUNDAY – 1 NOVEMBER 2020 – 1 JOHN 3.1-3,
MATTHEW 5.1-12

All Saints Day is today, 1 November. It is such a shame that the world puts more stress on All Hallows' Eve than it does on All Hallows' Day. As I said on facebook yesterday, I struggle with ghoulies and ghosties and long-legged beasties and things that go bump in the night – I thought that was an ancient prayer

From ghoulies and ghosties and long-legged beasties and things that go bump in the night. Good Lord, deliver us.

but apparently the first source of it is 1926, so it's more modern than many of our hymns. I suppose I struggle because death is so close, I've lost too many friends and family, many of them much too young. I've got three funeral this week, and Fari, whose funeral I will take here on Thursday, was only 45. I struggle this year, because I am frightened of what the future holds – but I mustn't let fear win. As I keep telling myself, this may be one of the younger church buildings I have had the pleasure of caring, but they have seen worse than this. We'll cope – indeed, with the love and power of God, we will do more than cope.

All Saints' is a day of celebration, as the saints of the past deserve to be remembered. All those wonderful biblical saints – Peter, Paul, Mark, Matthew, Luke and John – Stephen, the first martyr, the first man to die for his faith, Barnabas, son of encouragement – just a shame the gospel writers didn't tell us the stories of a few more of the women. We can celebrate all the saints of this country – in Northumberland we managed Bede, Aidan, Chad, Hilda (at last, a woman), in East Anglia Edmund, Felix, Etheldreda (at last, another woman), and I really must get my head round a few more Derbyshire saints. We can celebrate more recent ones – Janani Luwum, Mother Theresa, the first stood up against Idi Amin and paid the ultimate price, the second put the poor first, the people society despises, she cared for.

There's a lovely modern hymn by Fred Pratt Green

Rejoice in God's saints, today and all days:
A world without saints forgets how to praise.
Their faith in acquiring the habit of prayer,
Their depth of adoring, Lord, help us to share.

It was written in 1973 for the celebrations held in Norwich Cathedral to celebrate the 600th anniversary of the writings of The Revelations of Divine

Love by Julian of Norwich – Fred Pratt Green was a Methodist minister, and he wrote what I dare to call “proper hymns”. “When in our music, God is glorified, is also one of his and, as you know, it’s one of my favourites. There will come a time when we can sing together again.

Even when we can’t sing, there is so much we can celebrate, so much we can learn – and our world needs exciting, positive stories. There is so much in the news about people who fail – and, don’t get me wrong, I want my politicians held to a high standard – I need some people I can look up to. (I’m also aware that not every saint is perfect – learning from the saints sometimes involves asking the difficult questions – was Thomas More a saint, a man who stood up against the King for what he believed in, stood up against Henry because he believed the King was wrong? – but Thomas More was also a man who would use torture on the king’s enemies, believing he was doing God’s will).

The saints are not just the amazing people of the past. Fred Pratt Green puts it so well ...

Rejoice in those saints, unpraised and unknown,
 Who bear someone’s cross or shoulder their own;
 They shame our complaining, our comforts, our cares:
 What patience in caring, what courage, is theirs!

No doubt I have told you that when I first became a Vicar, Martin, my Church Secretary in Cockfield in Suffolk gave me a list of church and village people – names and phone numbers (no emails in those days). He had put a little star beside some names. “I’ve marked the ones I think are the saints” he said, “we’ll have coffee in a year and you can tell me if I’m right”. He was right, of course, except he hadn’t put a star by his name.

I have had the pleasure of working with a lot of wonderful people over the years – and many of them have now gone to glory, as we used to say in my Baptist days. All Saints day, 1 November, moves gently into All Souls’ day, the 2nd of November, when we remember the faithful departed. Some of them we remember every day of our lives, that huge gap which never really goes away, we just learn to live with it – others cross our consciousness quite regularly, and make us remember and smile. One of the things about being part of a church is that we are a community – we share the pain of our friends when members of our community die, we support others when members of our community die, and we learn that community is bigger than a few close acquaintances. Sadly this afternoon’s we won’t have an All Souls’ service which will bring people together in St Edmund’s – but I will remember everyone in prayer tomorrow.

When the apostle John wrote his first letter, he uses that lovely line “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.” In Northumberland last week we couldn’t had the pleasure of dinner with our children, but we had fish and chips outside at Beamish – and it doesn’t come much better than real fish, real chips, cooked in proper beef dripping over a coal fire. I am fortunate to have nice children, but it is worth reminding ourselves that we are children of God even when we’re not nice, even when the relationship is difficult. God must get so frustrated over what his children are doing, or not doing – looking at the mess we’re making of his world, he has every reason to be an angry father. Fortunately his love for us is greater than our love for each other – and we are called to show his love to this world. John talks about God being revealed, and a huge part of our mission is to be involved in that revelation.

This week moves on to Guy Fawkes Night – we won’t even start on the history or theology of that – and fireworks annoy me. Even in times of Covid, some of those who live in Allestree seem to think it is OK to let off pyrotechnics. The bangs and the noise – fortunately Selwyn the cat is totally undisturbed by it, but I get stressed. But I can’t help thinking that if I was in a position where I could see the light, watch the fireworks, see the colours and the flames and the glory – I would enjoy the fireworks so much more. Perhaps part of my struggle with my faith is that all too often I hear the noise and the chatter and the low level disturbance, and I don’t lift my eyes and see the colours and the flames and the glory.

Last week we went to Vindolanda – lovely Roman fort just south of Hadrian’s Wall. It’s one of my favourite spots, and we had a great day. You walk through the fort – actually there’s about four different forts, from different periods of the Empire, then down to the museum, shop and café. It is a beautiful walk down to the valley, and the trees in their autumn colours were just stunning. It is a place that lifts the spirit.

The museum has had some work done since I last went, and one thing they have on display are the remains of a chalice. 14 fragmentary remains, but found in the remains of a sixth century church, fragments covered by lightly etched symbols, Christian iconography from one and a half thousand years ago. I’ve put a link on the front page of the church website if you want to see some pictures.

<https://www.vindolanda.com/News/unique-christian-artefact-uncovered-at-vindolanda>

The thought that a Christian priest like me, would have held that chalice, raised that chalice, perhaps shared that chalice (though it’s not certain that, that early

in Christian history, the congregation drank the wine) – one and a half thousand years ago. That inspires me and encourages me. God knows his name, God knows his service, God knows and loves him – and his congregation. Whether they were saints, or sinners, or – like us – a mixture of both. Like us, they would have prayed, and praised, and read the Scriptures – and realised that they are blessed by God, just as we are.

The Beatitudes aren't easy. It is not easy to be poor in spirit, a mourner, or any of the others on the list. It wasn't easy then, it isn't easy now. The chalice frightened me because that early Christian church was founded as the Roman Empire crumbled, as the legions left, as all the certainties disappeared. That feels a little close to home. I hope that that priest, that congregation, that they kept their faith in the time of chaos. It can't have been easy for them – but if they can do it, so can we.