

The Parish of Bardsey with East Keswick

Sermon

Sunday 5 November 2023: Angela Hannafin

Good morning and welcome to another sofa sermon. Today in our parish we are celebrating All Saints Day so let's look at the scripture.

²² Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. ²³ Someone asked him, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?"

He said to them, ²⁴ "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. ²⁵ Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir, open the door for us.'

"But he will answer, 'I don't know you or where you come from.'

²⁶ "Then you will say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.'

²⁷ "But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!'

²⁸ "There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. ²⁹ People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. ³⁰ Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last."

Today we celebrate the saints. What or who is a saint you might ask? Simply put, "the life of a saint is not the life of a great man or woman, but of God's life in an ordinary man or woman". The life of a saint is marked by their holiness, by seeing God in them. We can see this in the gospel reading for today. Those who say they are for Jesus are turned away when their lives didn't show any proof of holiness, only evil. Jesus tells those he is with to go to make every effort to go through the narrow door because that's how salvation can take place. I helped someone move house a little while ago and it was a struggle helping them get all their belongings from a large house into a smaller one as they downsized. I remember seeing Gerrard pushing a ginormous mattress through a relatively modest front door. It was an effort. The way of holiness is an effort and Jesus tells us to put all our energy behind getting through that narrow door, even if it's a struggle. In order to do this, it requires us to ask God daily to help us, through the

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Holy Spirit, to choose his way and not ours, just as Jesus said in the Garden of Gethsemane 'not my will, but yours be done'.

Let's be honest, left to our own devices we will always try to please ourselves and choose the easy way: comfort, security, doing what someone else says even if we don't believe it. However, we are not on our own as we try to live in holiness. In our New Testament reading, Paul tells us that the Spirit knows we are weak, but will help us. We don't have to hide our spiritual weakness from God – he knows it – but wants to help us, not condemn us. We can't pray properly but the Spirit will pray for us and will do that in accordance with God's will. The Holy Spirit is in you and will help you into holiness. I spoke last week about the importance of community – spending time together, eating together, sharing each other's burdens – and as we do that we are encouraged into holiness. Being part of the body of Christ enables us to grow in holiness even as we struggle.

Our spiritual identity means we belong to a dynasty of saints. The Pope has said the Saints are "our elder brothers and sisters, on whom we can always count". We have a huge back catalogue of saints, a family tree of those who have gone before us to help us journey through pilgrimage. The lives of the saints are so inspiring and I encourage you to read about them because it gives you an example of how to live. There are so many saints to consider who gave us an example of holiness: my own favourite are those Celtic saints who lived just before our Anglo-Saxon church was built: Cuthbert, Aidan and Brendan. They were ordinary people who accomplished great things for God because of their holiness. These past saints inspire us and they are still with us even as we come together for the Eucharist. In the Eucharistic prayer we say that our worship of God takes place in the presence of his holy saints, who I've said before, I imagine are leaning over and peering down excitedly at us, in the same way you look down on other people in the theatre or concert hall. We are called to praise and glorify God for ever because that's what the saints are doing and that's what we will be doing. The post-Eucharistic prayer for today says that there are an innumerable number of angels with us as we worship, and asks that as we've shared their fellowship, so we will share their joy in heaven. We ask God to send his Holy Spirit and gather up together all who share this one bread and one cup. Saints all around the world gather at the feet of Jesus to worship him as we do.

Who are those saints today? It may not be who we think it should be. Jesus says they are those who consider themselves last. For those who think they are first, will be last. It's an upside-down kingdom. It's hard to say who the modern saints are, but perhaps they are those who persevere through suffering, adversity,

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discouragement, persecution and poverty. The saints are the prayerful ones, the humble ones, the trusting ones, who keep their eyes on heaven and not on what is happening here, who draw strength from God alone. Those saints today are those who stand up for the poor, the broken hearted, the marginalised and the displaced.

In these days of difficulty, we need to remember those saints who held fast to the teaching they had been given, often enduring great difficulty. As God's beloved and saints, we draw from their example as we look back. But we also look forward. The hope we have that as God's beloved, the hope that is in us by the Holy Spirit as a deposit of all that is to come. I think of Jessica in France, who whenever she writes to me, includes the phrase 'the best is yet to come'.

So may God strengthen us in holiness, and may we take encouragement from the saints who have gone before us. May God's Holy Spirit work in us as we journey, and one day will join with the other saints in eternal worship. AMEN.

Let's pray,

God our Father, on this day we give thanks for all the saints, whose lives impacted our world. We pray that you will strengthen us in holiness, so that the world will see you and your glory. In Jesus name. AMEN