**Sunday 29th October 2023**

**In Anticipation of All Saints Day**

**The Rev’d Andy Braunston**

**Note**

This service is in anticipation of All Saints Day which falls on Wednesday 1st November. Our discipleship is often muddled, confused, doing the best we can and offering all that we are to God – just as the saints of old did. In our muddled, yet eager, discipleship we come to worship and reflect on what it might mean to live as the saints did.

**Call To Worship**

Come all you saints, from west and east and from south and north:

**we come and worship God.**

Come all of us sinners, with our fumbling attempts at holiness:

**we come and worship God.**

Come, God’s people, saints and sinners, victorious failures and stumbling disciples:

**we come and worship God.**

Come and worship, find here, at this table, strength for the journey,

forgiveness for failure and inspiration from Jesus our wounded yet triumphant Lord:

**we come and worship God.**

**Prayers of Approach, Confession, & Forgiveness**

O Most High,

we come to rest from our labours and offer our praises to You,

our Rock, Fortress, and Might.

We come to meet You in word and song, movement and silence, and bread and wine,

knowing You hold us in the silence of Your love.

O Incarnate Word,

we come to confess Your name, as committed yet muddled disciples.

We see Your saints of old, Lord Jesus, and admire their tenacity, faith,

and determination to proclaim You despite the cost.

Forgive us when we’re distracted disciples,

when our faith fails and when our Christianity is compromised,

when we’d prefer to flee to ocean’s farthest coast rather than proclaim You as Lord.

O Eternal Flame of Love,

give us time to change, time to see the world around us,

grace to understand what proclaiming Jesus as King of Glory may mean for us now,

and time to see the more glorious day that awaits us and all the saints. Amen

My friends God is gracious and kind,

running with arms stretched wide in welcome when we turn back.

Your sins are forgiven, have the grace to forgive yourselves

and those who’ve wounded you. Amen.

**Prayer of Illumination**

Break open the Scriptures for us O God,

that in them and in the sermon we may hear Your voice,

calling, encouraging and leading us as we stumble after You. Amen

**All Age Activity**

I wonder how many people you know – people at school, people at church, people from where you live.

How many do you think you know?

Do you like them all?

What makes you like some and dislike others?

Whether or not we like them we’re surrounded by other people, like a big crowd. Sometimes they are close to us, other times they are further way but we know they are there. Today in worship we’re going to think a little about saints – friends of Jesus of whom there are millions and millions. We know some of them – they are sitting around us here this morning (though they may not think they are very saintly) and they are all over the country, all over the world. Often they meet like this openly where no one minds if we go to church, but in some countries they have to meet in secret as the authorities don’t like people going to church – they meet in each other’s homes so they won’t be discovered. Sometimes, in the past and now, people have been locked up and even killed for being Christian. Sometimes the Church recognises people like this as saints, other times their names are never known. Saints often disturb the way things are! By saying Jesus is Lord they remind those in charge that they are only temporary – that Jesus is the one who is really in charge. That’s what the saints did, that’s what we have to do, even if it means sometimes it gets us in trouble!

**Readings**

*Revelation 7: 9 – 17* | *St Matthew 5:1-12*

**Sermon Notes**

*Revelation*

The unnumbered multitude are those who held firm to faith despite fierce persecution who alongside Jews will be saved. They are what we now call martyrs and saints. Those martyred saints we read and sung about in Revelation were, of course, rebels. They refused to conform to the laws of their day choosing to worship just one God not the huge array of gods and goddesses to whom Roman society demanded lip service. Instead of asserting, as good Romans should have done, that the Emperor was Lord, they asserted that Jesus was. An assertion that means little to us now but was dangerous in the first Century. A Lord was the one who had power over you, originally the Greek meant the head of the household but the term came to be used of the Emperor, the head of the Empire. Now Christians proclaimed that Jesus, not the Emperor, was Lord. Jesus’ popular message that there was a Kingdom greater than even Rome’s, that God would provide for our needs and that even the poorest members of society would find relief and hope. This message both excited and troubled those who heard it. The belief that God raised Jesus from the dead in order to vindicate his message energised the Church with the proclamation of the Lord’s coming Kingdom. Those who then proclaimed and followed Jesus had an early statement of faith – Jesus is Lord.

*Matthew*

Jesus’ words here are similar to those recorded in St Luke though they’ve been made safer – Luke’s “poor” become Matthew’s “poor in spirit”. Luke’s ‘hungry” hunger and thirst for righteousness in Matthew. Matthew started a process of making difficult sayings, and people rather safer. The beatitudes sum up much of Jesus’ proclamation of the Kingdom and have inspired saints and worried rulers ever since.

*A Subversive Lord*

The earliest proclamation of Christian faith is the simple saying “Jesus is Lord.” That was edgy in Roman times and now. This simple proclamation understood that Caesar wasn’t Lord, Jesus was. The Empire wasn’t the greatest power in the world, the Kingdom of God was. Roman Law wasn’t the ultimate authority – God’s law is. This is edgy, dangerous, political stuff. No wonder those early Christians risked martyrdom. Those who gather in secret in Iran, Saudi Arabia, North Korea and in underground churches in China risk the same for the simple proclamation that Jesus not the Ayatollah, not King Salman bin Abdulaziz, not Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un, not President Xi Jinping, is Lord. An assertion that gives life and, for some, the risk of martyrdom. Being a saint is edgy stuff.

To assert that Jesus is Lord has political consequences. The Church’s enemies understand this so much more strongly than the Church does! Think of murdered Archbishop Oscar Romero gunned down whilst saying Mass because he spoke out against the murder, torture, and oppression wrought by his government in El Salvadore. What might it mean for us to assert that Jesus is Lord? Jesus, not the market, is Lord. Jesus, not the various politicians who vie for our votes, is Lord. Jesus, not fate, is Lord. If we truly believe this we put our faith in God despite the buffets of the markets, political failures, and the vicissitudes of fate. Jesus is Lord.

*Made Safe*

All this is, of course, edgy, dangerous, destabilising. The Church has been making saints safe ever since it edited down Jesus’ words on the Sermon on the Mount! Romero, despite being martyred, had to wait 40 years before the Church caught up with the people and recognised him as a saint.

Graham Greene wrote about this in his book *The Power and the Glory* which tells the story of the last priest who remained in a Mexican State in the 1920s persecution of the Church. In that era priests had to be licensed, foreign born priests and bishops were expelled, the Church’s property was seized and some states outlawed priests totally. In this context we meet Greene’s priest who wanders around the vast area of his parish, saying prayers for those who’d died since his last visit, officiating at marriages, baptising babies, and – in great secrecy and danger – celebrating mass for his people. As we read on we realise the priest is an alcoholic, has fathered a daughter, and becomes ever more careless – leaving his breviary at the dentists’ surgery for example. He has several chances to escape but refuses to take them and, eventually, he’s betrayed and shot. Everyone knew he was, simultaneously, a bad and a heroic priest. At the end of the book, shortly after the priest’s execution, two new priests arrive bearing little holy cards with pictures of the now martyred priest proclaiming him a saint to inspire the people. It’s fiction of course, but gets to the heart of what the Church does to make the saints safe.

*Muddled Saints*

Despite all this it’s true that the saints and martyrs were not that different to us. Saints are the ones who get what “Jesus is Lord” means. They aren’t ones who are holy in the sense of being separate, odd, or sanctimonious. Instead, saints are the ones who know that the simple claim Jesus is Lord is one that has profound implications for how we live, love, and structure our society. Saints follow as committed followers, like Greene’s alcoholic priest and like us, even as they and we are muddled, confused, difficult, and stressed disciples. Saints know that the journey of discipleship is one that takes us to the Cross; a journey where Jesus Himself stumbled and fell at least once.

**Affirmation of Faith**

**We believe in God, creator of all things,**

**who called us into being and set us in our place,**

**in whose love we live, move, and have our being.**

**We believe in Jesus, son of Mary,**

**poor carpenter from Nazareth,**

**preacher, teacher, and challenger of empire;**

**struck down by the powers and principalities of his age;**

**crucified, died, and buried,**

**but God raised Him on high, defeating death and evil;**

**and calls us now to follow him, and acclaim him as Lord.**

**We believe in the Holy Spirit,**

**fire of God’s love, sustainer of God’s people,**

**guide through life’s complexity and comforter of the broken hearted.**

**We believe in the Church,**

**the community of God’s muddled disciples,**

**who, together, seek to love, challenge,**

**and change our world to be a sign of the coming Kingdom**

**which shall last to the end of the ages. Amen.**

**Offertory**

The saints’ proclamation that Jesus is Lord is a profound statement of giving. It’s about the giving up of personal choice, natural desires, and our own inclinations to follow our Risen Master. For some it’s an affirmation that endangers life even as abundant life is received. The saints understood the paradox of giving – as we give we receive so much more. We know that we have to give to sustain the work of charities for which we care about, to support loved ones and to support the work of the Church. We give in many ways, through the bank, in envelopes, through loose cash on the plate. God loves cheerful givers and is even pleased with grumpy ones! And so we give. Let us pray:

Generous God,

you fill your saints with good things,

showering us with blessings,

easing our longings

and stilling our anxieties.

Bless now, we ask, these gifts that we’ve given,

that we may use them wisely

as we proclaim Jesus’ Lordship with our lives and our resources. Amen.

**Intercessions**

Most High,

we thank You for the saints of old who understood and followed Your will;

we thank You for their faithfulness and perseverance,

despite opposition, stumbling paths and muddled motives.

Give your grace now to those who seek to follow you in our age:

we pray for where the Church is persecuted and meeting in secret,

that You give grace, energy, assurance, and purpose

to those who dare lead and follow in those places;

we pray for where the Church is met with suspicion due to our sins and failings,

that those who have been wounded by Your people will find healing,

perpetrators find justice, and Your people find renewed humility;

and we pray for where the Church is met with indifference,

that we may live out our calling to understand the meaning

of our proclamation that Jesus is Lord.

*pause*

Lord, in your mercy…**hear our prayer.**

Risen Lord,

Your mother proclaimed that the world was about to turn,

and You preached good news to the poor,

freedom to the captive, and release to the oppressed.

Yet we prefer the world as it is, to accumulate more rather than trust in God,

seek ways of war rather than paths of peace,

and find ever more ingenious ways to imprison people.

Help us to be faithful and, like your saints of old, persevere,

despite opposition, stumbling paths and muddled motives.

Teach us, Lord Jesus, to truly live our calling to understand the meaning

of our proclamation that You are Lord.

*pause*

Lord, in your mercy…**hear our prayer.**

Most Holy Spirit,

despite appearances we believe You guide the Church, and that You guide us.

Help us to listen more keenly when You speak to us,

help us to hear You when you use unlikely voices,

social movements, and people outwith the Church, to inspire us to follow.

Help us to be faithful and, like your saints of old, persevere,

despite opposition, stumbling paths and muddled motives.

Teach us, Holy Wisdom, to truly live our calling to understand the meaning

of our proclamation that Jesus is Lord.

*pause*

Lord, in your mercy…**hear our prayer.**

Eternal God,

light in our darkness, comfort of the saints, guide of the perplexed,

we lift before You, in the silence of our hearts,

all those whom we love and worry about.

*longer pause*

We join all our prayers together as we pray as Jesus taught….Our Father…

**Holy Communion**

O Most High,

before the ages You loved and called us to be Your people,

through fire, cloud, and precious law,

You guided our stumbling footsteps,

tabernacling with us as we followed You into the wilderness.

Later, Your prophets reminded us, again and again,

to look to You and not to human rulers for salvation.

In the tragedy of defeat and exile You taught us to hope.

In the fullness of time You came to tabernacle with us;

Jesus, born of Mary, taught us to rely on You,

to feed the poor and hungry,

free the imprisoned, and proclaim liberation to the oppressed.

He healed the sick and through stories

taught us how to love, value and care for each other.

He sent his confused disciples out to proclaim the Gospel,

and subverted the powers of his age.

For this he was betrayed, given over to torture and shameful death.

Yet You raised him on high,

vindicating his message and his ministry,

and sent the Holy Spirit on us, muddled disciples that we are,

to continue Jesus’ work of loving subversion.

Send now that same Spirit on these gifts of bread and wine,

that as we eat and drink these gifts, You lift us into your presence,

fill us with Your love, empower us anew, and feed us with Your very self.

Surrounded by the mighty cloud of Your saints,

we remember the night when Jesus was betrayed

and handed over to the powers and principalities of darkness.

Before his betrayal he sat ate with his friends and, during the meal,

he took some bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them saying:

Take this all of you and eat it,

this is my body, broken for you.

Later, after Supper was over he took some wine, blessed it,

and gave it to his friends saying:

Take this all of you and drink from it,

for this is the cup of my blood,

the blood of the new and everlasting covenant.

It will be shed for you and for many so that sins may be forgiven.

Do this in memory of me.

Let us proclaim the mystery of our faith:

**Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!**

Risen Lord Jesus,

You meet us here in these simple gifts of bread and wine,

through which You feed us Your body and blood.

Strengthen our stumbling footsteps,

encourage our muddled discipleship,

renew our faltering energy,

that we may proclaim you Lord

in our lives and our loves,

in our society and in our values,

that we may subvert the powers of this age,

as the saints of old subverted the principalities of theirs,

that Your Kingdom may come

and all Your people be freed. Amen.

These are God’s holy gifts for God’s holy people.

The body and blood of Christ are given for us,

let us eat and drink in God’s holy presence.

**Post Communion Prayer**

Strengthen for service, Lord,

the hands that holy things have taken;

let the half blocked ears that now have heard your songs to clamour never waken.

May the faltering tongues which 'Holy' sang keep free from all deceiving;

the half-closed eyes which saw your love be bright, Your blessèd hope perceiving.

May the stumbling feet that tread in Your holy courts not be banished from Your light;

the famished bodies by Your Body fed be replenished with Your new life. Amen

*adapted from a prayer*

*by St Ephraim the Syrian*

Blessing

May the One who inspired the saints of old,

who guided them in good times and bad,

and who urged them to subvert unjust social orders,

inspire, guide and urge you – God’s humble, stumbling, saints

to be all you were created and called to be.

And may the blessing of Almighty God,

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, ***or*** Eternal Majesty, Enfleshed Word, and Abiding Spirit

be with you and all whom you love,

now and always, Amen.

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| **Hymn Suggestions** |
|  | RS | CH4 | StF | MP |
| For All the Saints | 658 | 740 | 745 | 148 |
| Hark How the Adoring Hosts Above*(works very well to Desert (Lyngham)* |  | 744 |  |  |
| Sing We The Song of Those Who Stand | 666 |  |  |  |
| Jesus Invites His Saints*Try doubling the verses and setting to Daidemata* | 434 |  |  |  |
| Rejoice in God’s Saints Today and All Days |  | 742 |  |  |
| Glory To You O God For All Your Saints in Light |  | 741 |  |  |
| For All the Saints Who Showed Your Love |  |  | 746 |  |
| Give Me the Wings of Faith to Rise*Richmond as set in StF is probably better known* | 664 |  | 747 |  |

You might also enjoy learning Brian Wren’s *A Cloud of Witnesses Around Us* set here to an American tune. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QImKfmYPMdg>

Given the proximity to **Reformation Sunday** this version of *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*sung by the group Koine might work as introductory music or music through Communion.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXOYVMkQ2nk>

And if you wanted to continue the **theme of subversion** what better way than using Mary’s great song of revolt? This version is particularly joyful. [*The Canticle of the Turning*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9QeTmRCpW4)

You might like, **as closing music** *When the Saints Go Marching In* using [this version](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wyLjbMBpGDA) by Louis Armstrong