

A sermon for All Saints Day 2018 Canon Michael Webb

Last Sunday a visitor asked 'Keswick St John but which St John?' Church could be dedicated to any number of St Johns.

13 September there is John Chrysostom (Golden mouth) defender of the faith in the 4th. Or December 4th John of Damascus who spoke at time of death of Mohammed against those who wanted to do away with pictures and statues. Or John of the Cross on December 14th 16th mystic who wrote about the "Dark night of the Soul". Luckily the visitor narrowed it to 'is it John the Baptist (24 June) or John the Evangelist whose name is on the 4th Gospel? It is the latter of course though because his day is December 27th don't have a Patronal Festival to remember him on.

Why are Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox and other churches often dedicated to a saint? Why do their pictures appear in stained glass or icons? Back in C7 John of Damascus wrote that saints were to be respected, their statues and pictures cherished and their lives regarded as models for Christian living. Or a C21 book, My Italian Bulldozer by A McCall Smith, Tonio speaks of a famous winemaker "They genuflect at his name round here. And I suppose he deserves it. We need our saints, don't we? All of us, whatever we do, we need to have some saints – people who are the heroes of whatever we believe in. Religion. Food. Football. Whatever. There have to be saints."

So in our Christian faith, we need heroes the Peters, Pauls and Johns to look up to, to challenge or encourage us to give us an example of Christlike living. In our collect we have already prayed for grace to follow the blessed saints in all godly and virtuous living. But the critics of our Calendar of saints say they all lived too long ago in a very different world, there are too many men and too many monks or martyrs. There is no one like us, who lived our life. How can we follow their example?

Of course there can't be an exact match for each of us and there has to be a lapse of time to get the true measure of someone's

life. But recently efforts have been made to include a wider and more up to date group of saints. So now we remember Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Maximilian Kolbe who were martyrs in the 2nd World War, Josephine Butler who campaigned for women's rights in Victorian England, Nurse Edith Cavell shot by the Germans in 1915 for helping wounded soldiers escape. (Patriotism is not enough it says on her statue). Campaigners like Florence Nightingale and William Wilberforce are there and mothers are represented by Mary Sumner, a vicar's wife who founded the Mothers' Union. All wonderful and helpful encouragement to us as Christians and closer to our life today but...even these are not ordinary. they are outstanding.

So perhaps that's why there is All Saints Day when we can remember all those who don't have a specific day and are not well known or even remembered at all. Countless people like us (we too are saints for our generation) whose lives have been made special by their faith and who trod the path we tread today. That's why the Gospel reading chosen for today about the raising of Lazarus is very appropriate. St John regards this miracle which raises lots of questions for us, as a significant driver of the plot to crucify Jesus. But how much do we know about St Lazarus? He is part of an unusual triple commemoration with sisters on 29 July. No day to self. And after raised to life disappears. Unless we believe later legends, there are no heroic actions and no martyrdom.

For me the only reason he is a saint is because he was a friend of Jesus. Indeed Jesus describes him as 'our friend' Such a deep friendship that here is only record of Jesus, crying - at his death. 'Jesus wept'.

Such a good friend of Jesus that this is where he went for R and R, to recuperate on his missionary travels and from bruising controversy. Here he was made welcome, given comfort, listened too and encouraged for the rigours of life. Lazarus must

have, with his sisters, have been the best of friends on whom Jesus could depend and find space to be himself.

Which makes Lazarus a good role model for All Saints –those unsung heroes of the faith and for us. What is more important than to be counted a friend of Jesus. It may be we have done or can do nothing spectacular but we can spend our lives drawing closer to Jesus and listening to him and drawing strength and encouragement for our own lives (often tough). Do you and I make time daily to rest in Jesus' presence? Do we think things through in his presence when we have a tricky decision to make? Do we read our bibles each day to grow more like our friend and to copy his way of life?

If we do, then we can be a beacon of hope for those around us. And that leads to the second thing. Perhaps we can offer the same service that Lazarus and Martha and Mary gave. Are we the sort of people that can offer a listening ear to others in our fast changing world? Can we lift our eyes from that little screen or our own problems to give someone our full attention and really hear them? Is our home a place of hospitality – not lavish banquets that impress- but simply sharing what we have so that others may find the peace of Christ too? Perhaps in our small way too, becoming part of the great company of saints. And don't forget to pray for and support those others who are in the thick of the battle. We can and should all be praying and encouraging people like Charles our vicar with his immense workload, Kathryn and the team getting Messy Church off the ground, the wardens Ann and Martin and all who keep this place running and welcoming the hundreds of visitors at the moment. You will have your own list but make it a spiritual responsibility to listen, support and pray for them (and not criticise).

I love the feast of All Saints with its great hymns and that sense of sharing in the huge family of the friends of Jesus, past, present and future. Perhaps today you can specially give thanks for the saints who inspire you. Perhaps you will come along tonight

when we remember by name all our own loved ones and those in the community whom we pray already see God face to face. I hope you will resolve to try to deepen your own friendship with Jesus laughing and weeping with him as you share all that makes up the tangled skein of life. And will try to be a saint, to be a Lazarus or a Martha or Mary and offer Christian love and hospitality and work for the peace and harmony that Christ wills for us and all creation.