

All Saints' Day

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, on Sunday 30 October 2022 at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey

Readings: Ephesians 1 vv 11-end and Luke 6 vv 20-31

All Saints' Day has become one of the significant 'hinge' days in the Church's calendar, taking us on from the long season of Sundays after Trinity as we turn towards the conclusion of the Church's year with the feast of Christ the King. All Saints' Day is celebrated on the first day of November, but, because of its significance, we transfer it to the nearest Sunday.

Many sermons have been preached on All Saints' Day reminding their hearers that all of God's people have the capacity to be saints. This is a message that flows from the pages of the New Testament, where St Paul frequently describes groups of Christians as 'saints'. We find this twice in today's reading from St Paul's letter to the Ephesians: 'I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints' – that is, all Christian people. And a few verses later, Paul prays that the Ephesians 'may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power'.

Today, we are invited to reflect on the possibility that we are saints – or, if we think ourselves undeserving of such recognition, that this may apply to at least some of those sitting near is in this church.

But this seems like a big ask. How can we live up to the greats like Peter and Paul? Together with the first followers of Jesus, they gave their lives as martyrs to spread the Christian faith across the Roman Empire.

So, can we learn from those nearer in time to us, to consider whether we might glimpse in their lives the possibility that we might indeed be called to be saints?

In the Calendar for yesterday, we were invited to remember James Hannington and his companions. Hannington was born in Sussex. Following his ordination, he served in English parishes and, briefly, as a missionary in Africa.

In 1884, Hannington was consecrated as Bishop of Eastern Equatorial Africa. He was sent to build up the Church in Buganda, an ancient kingdom in modern Uganda. Soldiers of King Mwanga of Buganda captured the group while they were travelling from Mombasa in Kenya to Buganda on the shores of Lake Victoria. A week later, on 29 October 1885, King Mwanga ordered their executions.

In the Gospel reading from Luke, after a series of blessings and woes, Jesus says, 'But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.'

We see this faith lived out in James Hannington and his companions. However, the persecution in Buganda was just beginning. Mwanga tortured and executed twenty-three Anglican and twenty-two Catholic converts to Christianity in a two-year period as he reacted against European incursion into Africa. These were African-born believers whose martyrdom transformed what is now Uganda. Those African believers showed true love for those who were torturing and killing them and so planted the seeds for a strong Church that has long

been led by indigenous clergy. Today, the Church in Uganda is indeed a powerful force in that country. Even Mwanga, who was exiled in 1899, would be baptized into the Anglican Church in the Seychelles, dying a Christian in 1903 at the age of 35.

Before the Church gives the title of 'saint' to a particular individual, we seek evidence of heroic faith, love, goodness of life, service to others for Christ's sake, and devotion. We certainly see these markers in Hannington's life. But Hannington's life was not straightforward. Even as we rejoice in Hannington's heroic witness to the Christian faith, which has allowed us to recognise him as a saint, we need to reflect that he was impetuous and failed to listen to advice. Hannington longed to share the Good News of God's love and grace and in so doing could not separate freedom and new life in Christ from colonial expansion. Even his capture and death were not without complications; there is clear evidence that Hannington had been warned of the political danger in a route to landlocked Buganda that was the preferred route for invaders. Mwanga wanted to push back against European incursion into his kingdom. He might have wanted to serve Jesus, but James Hannington's death also benefitted British expansion in east Africa. It's complicated.

When we look for saints, we find that their lives *are* complicated. Earlier in October, we remembered St Francis. We remember his foundation of the Franciscans, the religious order that carries his name. The Italian town of Assisi is soaked in the legacy of Francis, and his sister, Clare. Francis is seen as a forerunner of the contemporary concern for nature. He is the patron saints of animals and the environment. But does that extend a suggestion that Francis might smile on some contemporary forms of activism? After all, Francis has an interesting history before he embraced Jesus and holy poverty. Indeed, had Francis lived in our generation, he might have had explain some of the entries in his social media. Francis, now seen unambiguously as one of the great saints of the Church, was, in his life, more complicated.

This is why we need to bring some realism into how we think of saints. All of us are sinners. Not one of us is pure. We just know that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. What makes someone a saint is not that they are holy, but that God is holy, and we allow God to work in and through us. Every one of us in baptism is buried with Christ in his death to rise with him in resurrection. We are all called to be dead to sin and alive to God. We are all called to be saints - sinners who are transformed by our baptism.

God invites us to find our own unique vocation as James Hannington and Francis and all the saints have done. We are to serve Christ by serving others, loving God and loving our neighbours as ourselves. We are to go out from our worship so nurtured by the presence of our Lord in Word and Sacrament that this community is changed, even in a small way, and the world with it. We don't do any of these actions in order to earn or deserve God's grace and love, which have already been given to us freely. Instead, we love our neighbours as ourselves in response to that love, expecting nothing in return. Because we rejoice that God has given us everything.