

Sermon for All Souls and All Saints.

Grace Church in Scarborough

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Today's sermon is like a Halloween goodie bag of collected candies. Lots of bits which somehow belong together.

This week is All Saints and All Souls celebration. This is more commonly known as Halloween, the festival of ghouls and ghosties, tricks and treats and squeals of terror.

All of this has rather lost its linkage to the celebration of death and new life in Christ. All Souls was a remembrance of all who had died, and All Saints was a celebration of those we knew to be gathered up into the love of God. It was a grasping of the reality that death is both a tragedy, a loss, a thing of pain, and that it is the passing through a transition which we do not understand and can never comprehend. It is a transition that we have spiritual, experiential and anecdotal causes to believe leads us into a place of light, peace and love. This is the subject of a way of knowing that operates on different rules from the scientific way of knowing, and the two sit, sometimes uncomfortably for the science-minded, side by side.

Today we will read out the names of those people in your lives that you have written down as saints, holy people. We remember the saints with famous names, who often have statues and churches in their honour. It is a celebration of all the lives well lived with faith exemplified.

In my 20's I had a friend called Ivy Wetzleburger. It was in England and she was an American. One day Ivy told me that her ambition in life was to be a saint. "Brash American," I thought. "An English person would never dare to be so presumptuous." But something stuck in my head, and I thought that maybe she was on the right track.

But I want to back up and look at where the idea of saints comes from.

Firstly, one of my theological rules of life. Theology is always descriptive.

That means that theology comes in to being through people trying to describe what they have experienced at a spiritual level. Theology, understood like this, operates more like poetry, which also tries to put words on experience.

Theology sometimes gets turned around to sound like scientific prescriptions about God and us. This is a mistake and always destructive. It should always be avoided. Never allow someone to batter you with their theological certainties.

A poet may say "My love is a red, red rose" and we know he is not talking about a rose bush.

So when we say someone is a saint because we see God in them, we mean not that she was perfect, consistent or faultless. We mean that she had a closeness with God, out of which she struggled to live, and that we find in her words and life a window onto the God she tried to know and understand. We *sense* God in this life and these writings.

Back to the Sainthood plot....

Sainthood and death have always been linked up. (Perhaps we do this so that the person in question no longer has a chance to really screw things up.) We believe that death seals a life, and then, with God, all pretence is burned away and the truth of a person is clear.

Passing from life, through death into the eternal presence of God is a transition that we Christians believe in. We don't know for sure what it will be like. (Remember theology describes what we have hints of.) We have pictures of being in heaven from mediaeval paintings and from hymns in church. We also have a growing collection of first-hand stories from people who have died and been resuscitated. I have heard several of these myself and heard many more second hand. You probably have too.

They all unite around a sense of arriving somewhere, a place which is unquestionably good, beautiful, safe and welcoming, full of light. Many experience the presence of relatives and loved ones who have died previously. Many also have a sense of a presence of overwhelming love greeting them.....and then it ends as they go back, often reluctantly, into life. All that have told me their stories say they have absolutely no fear of death now. The psalm we heard speaks of the everlasting gates lifting up their heads and the King of Glory coming in. It is an image trying to say how even in a dreadful death the gates of glory will open even to you. And when you are there the King of Glory will come to meet you. This King is mighty in battle, which for a warrior culture means that no evil, no hurt, no failure, nothing that seems to you to overwhelm you...nothing can stop the overpowering love of God for you. That is what you will find revealed in your death, says the psalm, poetically.

It doesn't always feel like that for us who live on. In the death of the one we have loved our hearts break for the loss we experience. The hurt is real, and in direct proportion to the love we held them in. But at Christian funerals we celebrate the life we saw lived and the welcome waiting the one who has died. Grief and pain sit next to faith and joy.

But there is another part of the saintly path into death and new life I want to talk about.

It has been said that to grow is to change. And to be perfect is to have changed often.

Anglicans have a pathological aversion to this saying!

We avoid it because it means dying in stages. To change is to let something go, and make an empty space into which something new can arrive. Death and letting go are very connected.

Some time ago I was working with a priest whose father had suddenly died. Over the months prior to his death my friend had been struggling with a desire to be quieter, more meditative, more prayerful. But he was a whizz of a rector in a big, glitzy parish. He was busy beyond belief, keeping all the balls in the air and organizing like a whirlwind. His father got sick and we had to stop meeting for a few months. He took a leave of absence from his parish and sat by his father's bed. He tidied his father's house and wrapped up his father's many and complicated affairs. He spent hours in silence beside the bed in which his father eventually died. When it was all over we began to meet again. "I did almost nothing each day with Dad," he said. "But it was more than I ever do in my parish. When I was in the parish I felt bad if I sat still for a minute. And every sermon had to be an *ace serve*." He said. "I feel so much closer to God. How can I go back to work?"

A few weeks later he went back to the church. His first sermon was hesitant and intimate about his father's death. It did not have the clever zing of his ace sermons of old. People stopped to tell him how much the sermon had touched them. He began to have prayer groups instead of study groups. He said less and listened more.

One day, as we talked, he said. "My old professional self was so successful. But God asked me to let him die. As I sat with my father dying, my old self died too. I was frightened going back to work, because I couldn't be the busy, high functioning, super priest I had been. I didn't know what would happen."

My friend became holier, more saintly. He was less snazzy, less efficient, less productive and had to quite a whole pile of committees. But he let a part of him die, and he let God raise him to a new and vulnerable life. He ceased to be a manager of the church and became a slightly saintly priest.

Saintliness begins now, not just after death. Death seals the saintliness of the life already lived. Saintliness is really about living as if God is as present now as we expect him to be after death.

Saintliness is also about becoming the person we think God might have created us to be, instead of the person we have become in order to please everyone else. It is about authenticity, love, trust, faithfulness and hope.

Saintliness is about change. It is about allowing false images to die and waiting for true ones to appear. It is hard work.

And saintliness also is a life lived in the belief that there is more to this than meets the eye in life. There is a greater background in which our life is a small part. It is the background of unquenchable love which we meet in the life and teachings of Jesus.

Ivy was right in her ambition. Being still very English I find it hard to say, but, I think, yes, it would be good to be a saint.