

All Saints
30/10/2005

Mark the Evangelist

Rev. 7: 9-17
Ps. 34
1 John 3: 1-3
Matt 5: 1-12.

Sermon by Robert Gribben

There are not a lot of Protestant sermons on saints, but I could summarize all those I've heard since my boyhood in one well-worn illustration: negatively, the saints are flesh and blood, and not stained glass (not much doubt with those in the window behind me); positively, that saints are those through whom the light of God shines clearly. Both these things are true, if somewhat clichéd. I am quite sure that the point of remembering the saints is to remember the miracle that God is able to shine through ordinary lives. Of course, this fits in with our quite unscriptural tendency to favour a democratic approach to the Gospel: 'there is no hierarchy in heaven'. But there is theological depth in that too. Here is a comment by a 17th C divine, one John Scott:

In our baptism, wherein we gave up our names to Christ, we became denizens and freemen of heaven. All the difference between them [sc. the saints] and us is only this, that we are abroad, and they are at home; we on this, and they on the other side of Jordan; we in the acquest and they in possession of the heavenly Canaan... shame will it be to us not to copy their behaviour, we are below stairs in the same house.

Well, there is a great deal of 17th century Puritanism in that little quotation! - the tendency to think that life after death is preferable to that before it; the accent on imitation of the saints – and certainly not their invocation in prayer; and of course, the proper teaching that servants should copy the example of their masters (a very dubious precept). But there is one finely written truth there as well: '...in our baptism, wherein we gave up our names to Christ'. It is often thought that we receive our names in baptism; in fact the opposite is true. Rather, we take on the one name to which God responds, the name on the heart of the un-nameable God: Christ Jesus. God looks on us, not because of our inherited family name, or the 'name we have made for ourselves', but because God loves all He has made, and reached out decisively to claim us, when in Jesus He took our flesh, and died on the Cross. Truly we all have a Christian name, Christ's own name. We were 'Christened'! And that is the basis of the Protestant objection to particular saints: the language of the New Testament only ever uses 'saints' and its related words (sanctified, blessed) of all those who are 'in Christ', who have been claimed in baptism.

So it is interesting that our Church's new worship book, *Uniting in Worship-2*, has a calendar 'of other commemorations' (which it acknowledges is the equivalent of saints days in other churches) with no fewer than 174 names of individuals and three 'categories' – Pacific martyrs, missionaries of Korea and Japan, and martyrs of Korea. You'll be pleased to know that 'Mark the Evangelist' makes it, but on April 26th, a day later than the rest of the Christian world, though ANZAC day does not seem to be a major festival.

I'm sure that one of our traditional objections over the four centuries since the Reformation has been the machinery which the Vatican has invented to authenticate

those who are to be declared saints. This not to say the Roman Church does not have saints worthy of the name: quite the contrary. But somehow, popes and devil's advocates and proven miracles as a result of prayer to a saint don't seem quite to fit with a theology of grace whereby God declares blessed the poor in spirit, the bereaved, the meek, those who long for a better world, the merciful, the peace-makers, and the persecuted.

But all this, Roman or Uniting, is the merest surface level of what All Saints' Day is about. For one thing that can be said for democracy in the Gospel is: it's not only saints that are called to be holy! In today's epistle, St John reminds all the children of God that they will be 'like Jesus' and they are called to be 'pure as he is pure' (1 Jn 3: 3,4). That itself is the invitation of Christ, later in the Sermon on the Mount: 'Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt 5:48). Since one meaning of holiness is to be in perfect harmony with God, that was surely what Jesus came to restore. The whole doctrine of justification by grace through faith could be described in terms of all humankind being offered perfect holiness, with and through and in Christ.

John Wesley (who wrote a great deal about this) summed up Methodist theology like this:

Our main doctrines... are three: that of repentance, of faith, and of holiness. The first of these we account, as it were, the porch of religion; the next, the door; the third, religion itself.

From the moment we turn to God, and know ourselves reborn, he said, the Holy Spirit begins to work within us, changing our life's direction, healing our sicknesses, turning us more and more towards Christ, encouraging the love of God to grow in us. Here Wesley stands very close to Luther and Calvin; but perhaps the difference is this: that Wesley's whole movement was set up in order to guide people in their pursuit of holiness, and not just personally: he believed that the real goal of the Gospel was to transform society, 'to spread Scriptural holiness through the land'. And unlike the later 'Evangelicals' (so-called), he believed that no-one walked the spiritual journey alone: and so he bound every new convert into a small group, called a class, or an even smaller one for those who were most serious, called a band. And the network of Methodist meetings had no other significant purpose but to help people grow in holiness. And here, he looks most like some of those we easily account as saints who built Christian communities: Francis and Clare of Assisi, Dominic, Benedict of Nursia, Teresa of Avila, Bernard of Clairvaux - and in our own time, Roger of Taizé.

Here too, the Wesleys were most close to the greatest of the ancient theologians of the East: the Cappadocian Fathers of the 4th century. It was from Gregory of Nyssa (333-395) that John Wesley learned that the Christian life was dynamic, a journey of discovery in which there was always fresh knowledge and insight.

Charles Wesley frequently wrote of this dynamic in his hymns:

Send us the Spirit of thy Son
to make the depths of Godhead known,
to make us share the life divine.

Or

Give me a new, a perfect heart
from doubt, and fear, and sorrow free;

The mind that was in Christ impart
and let my spirit cleave to thee.

And most fully in the whole of his great hymn ‘Love divine, all loves excelling’.

But this is for everyone, not just the spiritually athletic. And it is not a height to be scaled by extraordinary effort, though it is certainly not gained without dedication and discipline (no worthwhile goal is) – but it begins with a gift: the Holy Spirit ready to work within us. And that happens by prayer, and worship in a congregation, hearing afresh God’s word in the Scriptures, receiving those rations for the journey which are given from this Holy Table, being encouraged by one’s sisters and brothers in the faith, discovering Christ in the face of our neighbours, and especially in those who most need God’s love, and ours. That is the point of the baptismal life. That is what it means to be of the company of the saints.

In a moment, our presiding Minister will pray the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving for all God’s gifts to us, and will hold out to us all the bread of life and the cup of salvation with the words, ‘The gifts of God for the people of God’. The original of this invitation, a millennium and a half ago – from the great St John Chrysostom - was ‘The holy things for the holy’: ‘the holy’, meaning you and me.

And the great crowd in the Church of the Holy Wisdom at Constantinople shouted back, ‘One is holy, one is Lord: Jesus Christ, to the glory of God the Father. Amen’.

But the wonderful thing we celebrate on All Saints Day is – the One who is truly holy desires to share it with the whole world.