

All Saints
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Mark the Evangelist

Daniel 7:1 – 3, 15 – 18

Psalms 149

Ephesians 1:11 - 23

Luke 6:20 - 31

Motifs of sainthood...

Saints have been in the news lately. The media frenzy over the canonisation of Mary McKillop caused one writer to ask: “Is she becoming a cliché for Australians, along with bushmen and Hills Hoists in our catalogue for national identity?” [Massam – *Eureka Street*] There are widely acclaimed “Saints” and there are ordinary ‘saints’ - rank and file church people who have never received the sort of attention we have just witnessed. All Saints, which really falls tomorrow, is not about a particular saint. It is about the whole company of the saints: women and men, ancient and modern, special and ordinary, smart and stupid, people of all shapes and sizes from every walk of life who believed in God and gave themselves to the world in the pattern shown to us in Christ.

The practice of recognizing the saints grew on the soil of the apocalyptic literature that flourished two centuries before Christ. Writings such as *Daniel* interpreted current wars and persecution as the last throes of a cosmic struggle between good and evil that would end with the vindication of the faithful and the “holy ones” or the “saints most high” [v 18] would inherit the Kingdom. Texts like *Daniel* were written to encourage the persecuted, and to remind them that God is to be trusted. The New Testament came to birth within this ethos, which saw in the events of Christ’s life, death and resurrection, the same cosmic struggle and the breaking in of the promised age to come. It was this that stimulated the Christian recognition of the saints, the first of whom were the Apostles who witnessed the Resurrection and then in proclaiming Christ to others, died for their faith. The book of *Revelation* (Ch 6:9ff) pictures them wearing white robes, carrying palm branches, as they pray before the throne of God. The saints are especially honoured *because their life conformed so closely to Christ*, who gave his life as a witness to God’s love for the World.

The first saints were local heroes celebrated either at their tomb, or at a church that housed their remains. As persecution spread others joined the ranks of the first martyrs, and by the second century their tombs had become places where people gathered on the date of ‘their birth into eternal life’, the date of their death. It was a celebration of life, not death.

Eventually churches began to share their calendars with another, and the list of memorials grew and became more wide spread. As it did so St Augustine wrote that there was an immense difference between devotion to the martyrs and the adoration of God: “We build temples to our martyrs not like temples for the gods, but as tombs for mortal men whose spirits live with God”. [Farmer – *Oxford* p xi] But whereas at first prayers were *for* the martyrs, soon they developed into prayers *to* them because as the image from *Revelation* suggests, they are already in the presence of Christ who intercedes for us with God.

When persecution and martyrdom ended the making of saints did not stop. Soon after their death those believers who had lived outstanding lives of holiness were recognised as saints by popular acclaim. St Augustine was one such and so was St Anthony. But there was something else. In times of martyrdom it had been necessary to distinguish between true and false martyrdom: so too when other forms of holiness needed to be verified. Before long churches began to ask what the proper authority and process for recognising a saint should be. Thus began a slow process of formalising the canonization of saints, [12th – 16th centuries] which we have witnessed. No one becomes a saint on their own say so and it still relies on local knowledge and initiative. There is no saint without a community of faith to support the claim.

In discussions about Mary McKillop's canonization, Protestant commentators spoke of how the Reformation stressed that the saints are the current assembly of believers [Eph 1:15, in Rom 1:7, Heb 13:23] who follow Christ. Protestant discomfort with the canonization process presents us with a challenge. If we are going to say: "all believers are saints", we should be able to say how we recognize exemplary sanctity or holiness and show how we might decide between what is false or genuine. If we were going to form a canon of saints what criteria would we use?

The question can really only be answered by appealing to the ways in which discipleship of Christ is manifested in a life that challenges us to a deeper way of being. In Ephesians the saints are the holy ones who live in response to God's call to life. This is part of the author's scheme in which the church as a whole is a new configuration of humanity through which God's ultimate purpose for the world is made manifest. Specifically it is a community in which all people, Jews and Gentiles, share the gifts of God. Therefore, a saint could never be a person who, in the name of Christ, sought to promote racial or religious superiority, or establish some form of apartheid. This is all the more so since in Ephesians an underlying idea is that there is solidarity between the saints sitting in this building right now, and all who have ever been called by God past, present, and future.

Luke's version of the Beatitudes also gives us some ideas about what motifs of sainthood to look for. Whereas in *Matthew* Jesus reflects Moses, who goes up to give the Sermon on the Mount, in Luke Jesus goes down to stand in solidarity with the people. The Sermon on the Plain manifests Kingdom motifs that provide a basis for discerning holiness. The Jesus who was raised up did not grasp at equality with God: he chose the path of solidarity, which reflected the great reversal that lies at the heart of God's action in the world. This pattern is why the sermon preaches blessing to the deprived, and woes to the satisfied. It is also why Jesus is found in the company he kept and did the things he did. These Kingdom motifs do not define comfortable boundaries. They are not speculative or informative. They are performative. In his life they bring about what they say, which is why he became so unpopular. But in choosing to "go down" Jesus chose to love his enemies, which meant he refused to allow himself to be shaped by the hostilities unleashed on him. He may have been a victim, but he did not succumb to the principles of his oppressors. Instead he lived according to what he had learned about life from God. He embodied the values of love, forgiveness and the kind of generosity that is merciful even to the ungrateful and the wicked. Less cannot be expected of his followers, and amongst this set of ideas, that go against the grain, are the motifs that will help us discern what we understand holiness to be.

When we went to the USA in June we crossed the Date Line and arrived 15 hours before we left. We liked to tease our American friends and say: “we have come from the future” – we were living signs of the future amongst them. The Nicene Creed affirms that we believe in “the life of the world to come”, an affirmation that God who has not left us alone calls us to set foot in the future and live in the gift it promises. When we take our place in the church we enter an expanded fellowship that has its origin in God who gives us a future: God who was, and is and is to come. This fellowship stretches across the ages to include all who have said yes to God’s offer of life. It includes those whom we have known who are still near and dear to us as well as many whom we may never have heard of, or whom we have forgotten. And there are those whose faith is known only to God. On this, the church’s memorial day, we bring to mind this vast company from all lands and all ages and demonstrate that we value our fellowship with them. And we give thanks to God who opened a gate that allows us to share, ahead of time, in the fellowship of God’s new creation seeded on the earth.
