

THE GREAT CROWD OF WITNESSES

Some years ago, Richard Harries, then Bishop of Oxford, wrote an article in the *Church Times* about All Saints-tide. He referred to a novel by Susan Hill, *In the Springtime of the Year*. It is about a young woman whose husband has died. At the funeral her feelings are described in these words: ‘What she became aware of...was not the presence of the village people sitting or kneeling behind her, but of others. The church was full of all those who had ever prayed in it, the air was crammed and vibrating with their goodness and the freedom and power of their resurrection, and she felt herself to be part of some great living and growing tapestry...’

Maybe few of us have had such a wonderful experience as that, yet the reality it describes is part of the faith of the Church. We live in fellowship with the communion of saints, the multitude which no man can number, of which the Book of Revelation speaks (*Revelation 7.9*). In the Eucharist, where we celebrate the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, where heaven comes down to earth and earth is raised to heaven, we join our worship with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, forever praising God and singing,
‘Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.’

On All Saint’s Day, when we celebrate the great cloud of witnesses with whom our worship is joined, it is easy to forget that saintliness is the goal and destiny of every Christian. It is our goal because we are called to be a holy people, set apart for the service of God; it is our destiny because God has promised those who love him a place at his table. As St John writes, ‘we are God’s children now; what we

will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.' (1 John 3.2)

The saints are not just those like St Paul or St Benedict or St Francis in whom the gifts of the Spirit are outstandingly manifest. The saints are those whom God calls to be his people. In the Letter to the Ephesians we read that God knew his own before ever they were: 'Before the foundation of the world he chose us in Christ to be his people..., to be adopted as his children through Jesus Christ.' And as children of God we are to inherit a 'glorious inheritance among the saints.' (Ephesians 1.4-5, 14) St Paul would not let those to whom he wrote forget this; he addressed them as saints – the saints at Rome, Corinth, Philippi and Thessalonica. If he wrote to us it would be to the saints in Sussex (or wherever we live); we too are destined to join the great cloud of witnesses; we too are called to be a holy people with a glorious inheritance.

Holiness, like the Kingdom, is both ours already and something we shall discover. It is like any relationship of love. Love is not static; it moves and grows. When we are with those who are close to us, we know that we are loved just as we are; but we know also that we are on a journey of discovery and delight in which love will grow and new depths will be revealed. In both love and faith, it is God who calls us forward on a journey into the fullness of his love. As Charles Wesley put it, we shall be 'changed from glory into glory, until in heaven we take our place.'

So how do we progress in holiness? In the world progress tends to be measured by what we have achieved or acquired; in the kingdom it is measured by what we can receive. Jesus has won for us the victory over sin and death, and it is for us to receive the fruits of that victory. The more completely we are able to do this, the holier we shall become. We look to people like Paul and Benedict and Francis not because they are flawless paragons of virtue, but because they are people who, above all, opened their hearts to receive the gifts

that God longs to give us. I once heard it said that a saint is a sinner who keeps on trying – which I found very encouraging! If that is true, then the path to sainthood lies in continually striving to be open to God. And as we strive to be open to God, so the gifts of the Spirit gradually take firmer root, transforming our lives in ways that are often clearer to those who are close to us, than it is to ourselves. This, I believe, is the way of purification of those who hope in Christ that St John commends (*1 John 3.3*).

Sinners are creatures of the world, and it is in the world, in our ordinary, everyday lives, that we are to keep on trying to be more open to God. Brother Roger of Taizé, one the great saints of our times, described this as becoming a people of the beatitudes, those virtues described by Jesus that mark out the saint.

As we seek meaning and purpose in our lives, we shall come to know our need of God; as we weep with the sorrowful, we shall find our own consolation; as we strive after a pure heart and a gentle and merciful spirit, we shall know God's mercy for ourselves; as we hunger and thirst to see right prevail in the moral and political confusions of our times, so shall we do the work of God; as we work for peace and suffer for the cause of right, we shall know what it is to be a child of God, and we shall enter upon our heavenly destiny.

Those who live in this way, Jesus says, will inherit the kingdom of God; they will find their consolation, and they will see him face to face. Keeping on trying to be open is not easy, but equally it is not beyond us. Standing up for justice, making peace between those who are divided, keeping vigil with the sorrowful, enduring insult for the sake of Christ, are part of our Christian lives day by day, and for which Jesus gives us the strength. For those who strive to live in this way, from time to time the everyday is lifted from us, and we see that we are not alone, just as the young widow in Susan Hill's novel saw that in her grief she was not alone.

Becoming a saint is not about spiritual heroics, nor is it about attaining perfection. St Teresa of Avila said that God does not expect a perfect work, but an infinite desire: be concerned about where you fall short, but don't let it overwhelm you; keep on trying! Desire is an affair of the heart, and the way of holiness begins in the heart – as Jesus said, 'Blessed are those whose hearts are pure.'

Today we celebrate those who let God enlarge their hearts so that they could receive from him the gifts he offers; sinners who kept on trying to model their lives on Christ until their hearts were pure. They are with us now; they show us the way of holiness; they call us to follow, so that in the end we, like them, shall see God. And so today, with the whole company of heaven, we join our voices in the great triumphal song: Blessing and honour and glory and power be yours for ever and ever. Amen.