

All Saints 2014

Today is one of those days in the church's calendar when we have the collision of several commemorations, festivals or seasons. The ecclesiastical version of "all your birthdays coming at once".

It is the fourth Sunday before Advent and the start of what we now keep as the "Kingdom Season"; a time when we long for the kingdom of God to break in to our ordinary lives, when next week we shall move to red as our colour of the season from the green that we have been using over the long period of time since Trinity Sunday.

This afternoon we shall be holding our commemoration of the Faithful Departed or All Souls service where we remember, pray for and give thanks for the lives of those we love but see no more; naming the promise and hope of faith that all who have died in the love of Christ, live still in the love of God.

This morning we have the feast of All Saints. In the New Testament the word saint is used of all Christians but historically saint with a capital "S" has been used for those canonised under Roman Catholic procedures or those who are particular examples of "virtuous and godly living" and you find me wearing white vestments to reflect this purity of living. These heroes and heroines of the faith are those in whose lives the grace of God has been seen powerfully at work. It is an opportunity to give thanks for God's grace and for how it can shape a human life, and to be encouraged by the example of the saints.

So this morning I would like to share with you the stories of 3 saints that have inspired me.

The first is St Edmund, King and Martyr. Edmund was King of the East Angles. He was born about 840 and became King first of Norfolk and then Suffolk at 15 and 16. As a King he won the hearts of his subjects by his care of the poor and steady suppression of wrongdoing. Those who know their early English history will know that East Anglia was subject to continuous Viking raids at this time, when Edmund came face to face with the Viking he refused to give up either his kingdom or his faith; he was subsequently tied to a tree and shot with arrows and beheaded in 870. Legend has it that his head was found in a wood being guarded by Edmund's faithful wolf hound.

I grew up in the town in Suffolk called Bury St Edmunds, the place where his body was eventually brought for burial and became one of the great places of pilgrimage throughout the Middle Ages. The story of St Edmund is part of my story, as a child growing up I knew the legend and played in the Abbey ruins where his shrine had been. What was planned as an obscure and publicly shameful death has spoken over the centuries to people of honour and courage, and continues to watch over the town that bears his name.

Secondly I'd like to introduce you to St Teresa of Avila. Born in 1515 into an aristocratic Spanish family, she ran away from home to enter a Carmelite convent when she was 20. She initially found prayer difficult but then began to experience the presence of God intensely in silent and contemplative prayer and attracted many disciples. She reformed the rule under which her religious order was run and was known for her no nonsense approach. She was

strict with her nuns about sleeping and eating properly and could be sceptical about the religious experiences of others. Her books about her spiritual life and personal progress in prayer are still classics today.

St Teresa reminds me that prayer is something to be worked at continuously and that God can be profoundly experienced in silence.

The last Saint I'd like to talk about is St Benedict of Nursia, Abbot of Monte Cassino and described as the father of Western Monasticism. Benedict was born in central Italy in about 480. When sent to study in Rome he was appalled by the corruption that he saw in society and withdrew to live as a hermit, but he quickly attracted disciples and began to establish small monasteries locally. Later in life he wrote his Rule for Monks that many of you will have heard of as "The Rule" of St Benedict. He based it on his own experience of fallible people striving to live out the Gospel. He never intended to found a religious order but his Rule was so good that it became widely available and followed.

The Rule is short, only 73 chapters long, some chapters are only a short paragraph, but it deals with all aspects of monastic life; how prayers are to be structured throughout the day, the hours of sleep and recreation and work, duties to be performed, how much monks are to be given to eat, how visitors are to be looked after and much more. I myself first became interested in the Rule about 20 years ago and I warmed to it because Benedict does indeed understand the frailties of human nature. He knows that some will have trouble living in community, and that some will grumble or need looking after, and he knows that God is to be found not just in prayer but in all the tasks of life.

The vows of stability, obedience and conversion of life are followed not just by those who live in monastic community but also by thousands across the world who live ordinary lives; but what I find most striking about the Rule of St Benedict is his guidance on hospitality. This is not just the offering of shelter and refreshments but an openness of heart and mind to each other, the stranger and God. Treating all with whom we come into contact as if they were Christ himself; I have found as I have struggled to do this that so often we receive back from those we welcome far more than we give.

These then are 3 of my favourite saints; The brave King of my childhood, the Nun who persevered in prayer and the hermit who found himself founding and writing about how best to live the monastic life.

Saints do not have to be those who lived long ago, I'm sure that we can all think of people who have inspired us as we have moved through life. The Saints remind us that in the extraordinary and in the ordinary events and daily living of life, holiness and godliness can grow and that we all have the capability to inspire others.

Let us remember with gratitude those whose example we remember with awe, respect and affection and ask God for his Grace to renew our lives that we too might encourage others.

Amen