

November 3, 2019  
All Saints Sunday  
The Rev. Mark B. Pendleton  
Christ Church Exeter

## The Saints Among Us

I want to talk to you this morning about the meaning of this feast day, but before I do, I want to begin and conclude with an invitation that I hope you will carry with you and think/pray about in the week ahead. When it comes to your life and walk with God – or put in another way – when you consider the person you are today, who is one person who has shaped or encouraged you? Who has been or is a go-to person to right your ship when you blew off course when you needed reassurance? And let the tables be turned as well as well: who do think you are shaping and impacting the most through your life, your counsel, your example? And don't be afraid to go outside the family circle.

Now to this feast day. While the wind was blowing and howling this past week, churches around the world marked the feast of All Saints' one day after All Hallows' Eve – or Halloween – which has grown into one of the most commercial and festive days of the year. Halloween has Celtic roots as a harvest festival when the dead were said to return to the places they lived – great bonfires were lit to frighten off evil spirits. “Hallow” was an Old English term for saint.

All Saints' is about celebrating the saints – known and unknown, past and present – the name kind of gives that away. It is All Saints' Sunday, not Some Saints' Sunday or Just the Really Holy Saints' Day. We move this feast day to the Sunday that follows each year so that we do not miss out on its meaning to help us live the kind of lives of faith that many of us long for and work towards.

In the New Testament, the term 'saint' was much more of an expansive and inclusive term. It did not imply a holy person per se, it meant simply a fellow believer. Someone who came to believe that God is known most fully in and through Jesus of Nazareth, who lived, loved, healed, and taught and according to those who were there and believed was raised from the dead. To be saint is to be a person who in the words of Paul to the Ephesians has put “our hope on Christ.”

It is a reminder that when it comes to God, people are more highly valued than doctrine, proclamations, knowledge or even belief. It about seeing how lives are transformed and changed by others though the light and love of God.

We begin with a simple theological truth. We are created in God's image and then make the jump to state: there is, after all, no life that is not valued in God's eyes. Even the train and ship wrecked lives – perhaps even more so -- of those who have committed terrible wrongs. Even those ego-charged souls who believe the world revolves around their needs and interests. Their lives too. To the hurting and wounded who find it hard to believe that God cares for them when no one around them their entire lives – including their families – cares much at all. It can take a lifetime convincing people that God is not keeping score but offering a way into a circle of understanding and love that moves through time and eternity.

When I sit with people to listen what is most pressing upon their hearts, the conversation often come back to how hard it is to move on from the past. “What if” is a powerful phrase to paralyze us from going anywhere good.

That is only one of the reasons we need saints in our lives – past, present and yet to come. They draw us out of the seeming limits of our lives to move among a greater community. We are not alone in this life that at moments can seem so hard and lonely and overwhelming. That for me is what All Saints’ celebrations bring home.

The day after All Saint’s is All Souls’ – all faithful departed – a time for us to remember with intention those who we have known and loved but see no longer. People around the world visit the graves of loved ones. Yesterday we interred the ashes of a one-time parishioner in our memorial garden – as she joined the remains of her husband who had died years before. Over consecrated ground we hear: “Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” We are all, sooner or later, returned to where we have come.

As a community, we add to our prayers that names of those who have died this past year. There is power in naming and remembering. Those named are not forgotten and live on in the hearts and memories of those close to them and, we believe, in some great mystery, live life eternal in a place and a time where God is fully known.

It is no accident that the ancient Celts engaged with a life beyond during a time of year when the harvest is past and the long winter months are approaching. This very thin place and time, as they would refer to it, comes when nature is signaling a season of falling away and loss.

For us then, less moved by the rhythms of harvest, we can consider how we as God’s people are all connected – how we are knit together, as the collect describes it – into one mystical fellowship. We are in this life together. We share in joys and setbacks, laughter and tears.

Most of you know that I have returned this past week from two weeks in Brazil. Some vacation time before attending a five-day conference of Anglicans and Episcopalians from around Latin America and the Caribbean. This is my fourth of these annual gatherings that bring together a remarkable group of diverse people from Mexico to Jamaica, from Peru to Barbados, from Brazil to Belize. We had archbishops, dentists, youth workers, seminarians, real estate agents, farmers and policewomen. What knits us together is the historical accident and/or the work of the Holy Spirit that pushed missionaries from the Church of England and the U.S. throughout the Western Hemisphere. We share a common way that is a middle way between the Roman Catholic and Protestant ways be being church. My particular role was to help draw people into deeper conversations across regions – to get a rector from the Bahamas to share with a vicar from Ecuador. For me, these annual gatherings are touch stones for me and precious times away to drink from the deep well that first called me to faith on a beach in Ecuador when I was twenty years old.

Brazil is a vast country that is facing some of the same polarization and crisis as our own. This past summer the world saw what has been going on for decades -- many parts of the Amazon rain forest ablaze and as ranchers are moving deeper and deeper into an area that has been called the “lungs of the world.” We are all knit together in this large, diverse, fragile world.

Paul also wrote that in Christ we have obtained an inheritance. Ephesians 1:11. We have been given something whose worth cannot be measured.

When you and I think of inheritance we might think of a scene of sitting around in a lawyer's office with family members waiting for a will to be read of the recently deceased. In reality those scenes are far and few in number.

All Saints' Sunday this year stands out because in the first time in the life of this parish, we have gathered all the names of those who left this living community an inheritance – a legacy -- that continues to have impact through the decades. We have named this communion of saints the Anchor Legacy Society and we have listed their names in our bulletin today and on a framed display in the entrance hall and in the Parish Hall.

A husband and wife, Nathalie and Edmond Baylies, gave the first bequest back in 1879. Caroline Harris of Harris House fame gave her home when we passed to be the first parish rectory. Edward Dodd, a son of one of our rectors of the same name, was most generous in his legacy that provided for much of our recent beautiful renovations of our church and meeting spaces. Our last gift was received just two years ago from the estate of our former Senior Warden, the one who worked with me so closely in my first few years here in Exeter, Chris Kramer. On this day, we remember them all. They left behind a piece of what they valued to make a difference for generations to come. We will spend the next year gathering the of names of those of living who have also taken that step to make a plan to make a bequest or planned gift to Christ Church.

I feel the need to say that, for me, this effort is not about institutional preservation. We are not endowing a church museum to be around for future generations to kick around in and see what we found important and interesting. We are making this renewed effort because we see all around us the fruits of the inheritance of those who came before us. Christ Church in Exeter would not be as vital, as open, and as accessible without these saints.

When a parish has a Legacy Society, it is an opportunity to lift up what really matters in the long run over the course of our lives. What are our values. Yes, some of us may give to our colleges or to Hospice or NPR or the SPCA after providing for family – all good endeavors. And we can recognize that to be a Christian is to not to walk alone. We are not a collection of hermits. Christians gather. Christians learn from one another. Christians pray for one another. Christians serve the world out of our what we have received. Jesus said to the saints who were poor, hungry, who were weeping and hated and excluded, you are blessed. And because you are so blessed: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. Do not return hate with more hate. Give. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

Our work as saints is never fully realized.

When it comes to who you are today, name one person who has shaped or encouraged you. Who has been or was that go-to person to right your ship when you blew off course? Lift up and remember that person in your prayers and in your hearts. And see how God is working through you to be a light, an encourager and an example for another of God's saints on this journey that we all share.