

## All Saints by Andrew Sunday 3 Nov 2019

### Luke 19: 1010

Years ago I heard a catholic priest challenge a congregation of young people, by saying: “Be a saint – why not?” Well, I love saints. I love them among other things for their sheer wackiness – I find it a great comfort that people even weirder than me have chosen this path, and whether in spite of their wackiness or because of it (I’m never sure which) they shine a light for us to this very day. Among my favourites there’s St Jean Marie Vianney, the Cure D’Ars, patron saint of parish priests – so poor academically that the bishop had to be persuaded to ordain him at all, and yet people flocked to him by the thousand, to find in him the gentlest and wisest of confessors.

Then there was St Joseph of Cupertino, who lived in 18<sup>th</sup> century Italy, who was famous for levitating whilst saying Mass, which must have been hugely distracting, not to say entertaining for his and his congregation. He was brought before the Inquisition, locked in his room, passed from one monastery to another to keep him under wraps as it were. But nothing could restrain his sheer simple joy. And in the end the Church canonised him – and he is now (I just love this) the patron saint of air crews; air travellers; aircraft pilots; astronauts and paratroopers.

But far more important than any of that is the fact that saints are never lukewarm, they’re never boring, and they make us think. Like Daniel, they dream dreams and see visions. They challenge us to maybe just catch a glimpse of what they see.

I often think this is exactly what happened to Paul or Saul at the martyrdom of St Stephen. There he is holding the coats, whilst the others do the nasty business of stoning this innocent man, when all against his will he looks into Stephen’s eyes, and he sees what Stephen is seeing – which was heaven opened wide and Jesus at the right hand of God. And that glimpse of what Stephen saw never lets Paul go. He can pursue Christians, persecute the saints from town to town, but the Hound of Heaven is after him, and he’ll become the saint who would burst Christianity out of its Jewish chrysalis, and gift it to the world.

The fact that God can take weirdos and persecutors, that the very Church is built on the deeply flawed rock of St Peter – that impetuous friend of Jesus who wept over his betrayal – all this gives us heart. We can shine not just in spite of who we are – but because of who we are. The fire and passion of Paul, probably *the* most crabbit apostle of them all (who could fall out with people before he’d even had his breakfast), is transmuted in God’s hands into spiritual poetry and insights that touch hearts every day: If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am nothing – Paul.

And Peter who never stopped to put his brain in gear before any decision he ever made is the same old Peter to the last, reckless, foolish, sometimes fearful, but also full of love and courage. He’s running away from Rome, terrified of persecution when he meets Jesus on the Appian Way heading into the city: Quo vadis Domine? Where are you

going, Lord? To be crucified again, answers Jesus; and Peter turns right round – frightened as he is – to accept his destiny.

So saints are not people who get everything right. They shine, but they're not squeaky clean; they make mistakes; their lives don't necessarily stand the closest scrutiny. But saints – and this is the critical point – are people who know their need of God, and they make themselves available. They put the meagre resources that they have, even their fear, at God's disposal.

The writer and priest, Donald Nicholl, records the story of a man who was lying desperately ill in hospital. He writes: He was almost out of his mind with terror and confusion induced by the drugs administered to him. Nothing of his true self seemed to remain except a tiny particle the size of a grain of mustard seed. Outside that particle all was chaos and darkness. Suddenly he heard a voice from the nearby corridor: "I'm that bloody lonely I could cry". It was the voice of an old miner who was in hospital for the first time in his life and he'd been left in a wheelchair in the corridor. The old miner had cried out because he was overwhelmed by the impersonality of it all. Hearing the terror in the old man's voice the desperately ill man in the neighbouring ward, from the pit of his own terror, said to himself: "I'll go out and sit by him if it's the last thing I do." And so he did. And from that moment his own terror began to lift. A process of healing had begun in him, so that soon he was more whole than ever before in his life. In the voice of the old man he had heard the voice of God calling him to wholeness and holiness. You can begin anytime, anywhere, even if you are only a tiny grain of mustard seed lying in a pit of terror.

This is the ordinary goodness that makes saints. They're quite simply people like us. They are us and we'll be naming some of our own saints in love and thankfulness in just a moment. The Beatitudes of our Gospel show what God can do with us – with our poverty of spirit, and our mourning, and our hunger, our emptiness; but also with our merciful living with other people, our peace-making, our endurance through tough times. God needs our weakness and our strength, and even our weirdness. We may not find ourselves levitating, but we can *all* listen to God's voice in the cry of the old man in the corridor, our brother, our sister. This is how God makes a holy people; this is how God makes saints. So be a saint – why not?