

## WHO ARE THE SAINTS?

NOVEMBER 2, 2008

November is here. 2008 quickly moves towards the conclusion of its time in history. We look back as a parish to a busy October which opened for us with the celebration of the Lord's Supper on World Wide Communion Sunday. At Wesley we welcomed two new members on that day into our worshipping community and fellowship.

Then it was Thanksgiving Sunday with all the wonder of God's bounty decorating our churches. Family members from all over home for the celebrations joined us in our worship. Friendship church hosted a memorial service for a long time community member and Wesley celebrated the marriage ceremony of two of its young people.

Last Sunday, the last Sunday of October, our two congregations worshiped together and agreed unanimously to call the Rev. Robin Sherman to be the new minister of the Prince Edward Pastoral Charge as of January 2009. What a wonderful conclusion to a year's work by our Joint Selection Committee who we entrusted with the sacred task of discerning God's will for the future leadership of our Parish. We believe God is with us as we plan for a walk of adventure in the faith with our new church minister.

Will November be any less exciting and meaningful to our faith community? I rather suspect not looking at the busy schedule of planned events. Next Sunday is Remembrance Sunday, that time we take to thank God for the unselfish sacrifice of others to ensure our freedoms and our way of life. Then before we know it, Advent Sunday arrives heralding the beginning of our annual journey to the manger. In between we have the Chili Supper fund raiser at Wesley and the Annual Christmas Auction at Friendship.

Friday was Halloween, yesterday was All Saints Day and today is All Souls Day. It is a fascinating weekend if we take in the meaning of each of these days. Throughout time, people in all cultures and places have been fascinated by the concept of the place of the dead and the future home of the spirits of those who have gone before us. Through most of history, people have been unnerved by the concept of spirits good and evil roaming the land of the living. People often assumed that these spirits were unhappy and more than willing to cause havoc with and for those who were alive. There was an old belief, for example in Europe, which held that you should not put lit candles on a windowsill as it would attract and lead evil spirits into your home.

The Church in its earlier days, tried to counteract these beliefs that mankind had no control over these spirits. The belief grew that only the saints, those who had lived exemplary lives or who were martyred themselves could overcome such evil on our behalf. Thus the naming of October 31<sup>st</sup> as All Hallows Eve or Halloween as we know it today. The concept was as follows: Evil spirits were aware that only true goodness had any control over their free roaming of the world. So when the Church named November 1<sup>st</sup> as All Saints Day as the day each year to celebrate, remember and thus bring back to life the memory of the saints who had withstood evil and remained true to God, it was believed evil spirits understood and feared this powerful day. Thus on All Hallows Eve the evil

spirits tore around the earth for one last time, often disguised in costume to fool people into complacency.

In Medieval Europe, people truly feared these spirits roaming among them on October 31<sup>st</sup>. So people began to dress up and roam the streets themselves to confuse these spirits and perhaps diminish their power. They would say to friends, merchants or complete strangers that they wanted a treat or they would do tricks.

All Saints Day was a time of real celebration. As dawn broke over the towns and villages, people streamed out to rejoice that the evil spirits had been once again put back in their place for the next year by those holy and pure people who had been created saints by the church.

As you are aware, the church had declared certain Christians as saints to recognize their particular saintliness in the faith or because they were martyrs who lost their lives due to their unwillingness to deny their faith in Christ.

As the church expanded in numbers and strength, there grew a sense that there needed to be recognition of the lives of the many ordinary people who had attempted to follow as best they could the teachings of Jesus. These valiant persons, though dead, were an inspiration to people attempting to follow Christ honestly and with deep commitment. Thus the Church decreed the day after All Saints Day to be known as All Souls Day when the blessed dead were remembered and services of thanksgiving were held in grateful recognition of the gifts of faith of those who had gone before us. This was the day when the ordinary believer, also deemed a saint, was recognized and remembered.

So when you speak of saints today, who do you think about? At one time in the church's history, all believers had their favourite saint whose image they often wore on a neck chain. Millions for example wore and still wear the image of St. Christopher. Probably the most popular especially in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox faiths is the image of the Virgin Mary. Holding these saints close gives comfort to many people.

In our first reading this morning from Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica, we hear Paul speaking about the natural grief a person has in the death of a loved one. Paul does not discount the pain of grief but reminds the readers that Christians should not grieve with a sense of hopelessness. He says this: "For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep." In other words, Paul is proclaiming the good news of Christ, that in his sacrifice, death and resurrection, Christ has shown to us that God has the intention that all who die should live again in him. Thus Paul speaks of the marvel of what we have seen in the actions of God through Jesus. It is as if he were saying to the people of his day and to us to not fear death, for it is but a step into an ongoing life with God.

Paul was personally aware of the high price many Christians were paying as they defended their faith in Christ. He also knew that in the future it would get worse as the Roman Empire would surely fight back against the growth of the Christian Church.

Many would die for their faith. Hold fast to your faith and remember that God has promised a life beyond death for all who believe. Be not in grief which holds out no hope. In your grief remember that our loved ones have gone to be with God as will we all in our own time.

So often Jesus turned the beliefs of his day completely around. Our Gospel reading from Matthew's Gospel lists the well known Beatitudes of Jesus. What is beatitude? The Interpreter's Dictionary states the following about beatitudes. The beatitude is a literary form, which commences with the word "blessed," and constitutes a declaration of praise for an individual regarded as an unusual example of moral correctness and piety, who, as a consequence, might anticipate some appropriate reward from God. As expressions of joy and hope, and occasionally even sorrow, beatitudes reflect varying, yet general, aspirations of human life.

What is interesting here and that which was the cause of such disbelief of many who heard these words, was the listing of who were blessed. It was not those who were the leaders of the faith or those richly blessed with wealth, position, education and power, but those for whom life had often dealt a difficult hand.

What did Jesus say? Blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are those who mourn; blessed are the meek; blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; blessed are the merciful; blessed are the pure in heart; blessed are the peacemakers; blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake; blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all evil against you falsely on my account.

This is quite a list and one the world of Jesus' day would have a hard time believing. Is God really this generous, this loving and so open to all people who believe in spite of their position in life? Yes, Jesus proclaimed, this is how God thinks and this is how we need to begin to think and act if we want to understand and truly worship God.

These people Jesus spoke about are the saints, those who worship God in spite of hardships, worry and pain. God understands only too well the position in which we find ourselves. God sends his Spirit to enrich and surround us with peace and assurance and love.

As we think of all of this, how do you feel about being considered a saint? So often when we as kids thought about a saint in school we dubbed it "goody two shoes". This was no doubt a demeaning dismissal of someone we thought was too good to be true. There is something in people that makes us react with sarcasm and disbelief when we are confronted by a truly good and honourable person.

Perhaps what it does is confront us as a mirror which reflects our own less than stellar ways of reacting and doing things. We are humbled in the presence of goodness.

We are to be the saints, those who not only have heard of the Christ but have given our allegiance to him in faith. Martin Luther, that great German scholar and church reformer said this about the faith we are to have in Christ. "Faith is a free surrender and a joyous wager on the unseen, unknown, untested goodness of God."

What a wondrous definition for us. In other words, we need not have all the answers before we take the leap of faith in the Creator God as we have come to know him through the words, deeds, life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

All Saints Day and All Souls Day are days to give thanks to God for those whose faith and personal example has led us to Christ. It should be our aim to join those who we revere and to be a beacon to those who come after us. AMEN

Rev. Gary Magarrell