

Blessed*Daniel 7:1-3; 15-18; Luke 6:20-31*

Once you get beyond the old Scottish traditions of Halloween, and ducking for apples, and eating the treacle covered scone suspended by a string attached to a broom handle, to the current-day-glo orange of the tiresome 'Trick-or-Treat' trans-Atlantic infestation, you come to one of the most poignant yet vibrant old Christian traditions - All Saints. Part of the reflection and celebration around this time in some churches involves Christians recalling the faithfulness of past generations and the heritage we receive from them.

In times of darkness, challenge, maybe even existential danger for the Church, to be reminded of God's 'holy ones', or God's saints from the past, and how they triumphed over or simply endured and survived, no matter how bleak their times, is one that gives strength. We have the opportunity to be wise with by-gone years. Not that we want to travel backwards. Nostalgia tickles the memory but deadens the soul. We carry in our minds that by-gone wisdom, but with our eyes firmly fixed on the future that God lays out before us.

If we today are God's saints, however uncomfortable that thought may make you, how, then are we to live?

Matthew's version of our reading from Luke is so much better known than Luke's. Matthew sets the sermon a mountain. Luke sets his version on a level place. Bearing in mind the fact that gospels are composed pieces where material about Jesus is gathered and grouped together for a purpose and to make a point, we should know that for Luke, the mountain is a place of prayer and dedication. It's where Jesus calls His disciples. By moving down the mountain to the plain, to the flat ground, Jesus goes to the place where He engages with the people, the place where things

are to get done. After the necessary prayer and reflection in the high place, it is time to come down the mountain to put the prayer and the theory into practice and action. The faith of Jesus, and therefore the faith of His saints, comes to help us not only in the good times when we're on a high, but in the difficult times when we feel ground down and weary and worried. Heavenly faith must have earthly use. Pious people with their heads in the clouds have a habit of stumbling over the tripping stones of life on earth.

Luke has Jesus amongst us, on the good flat earth. No juxtaposition in the Gospels could make any clearer what a difference one's perspective makes. Do we see Jesus and His aspirational values, high up, something to be reached after as the lofty goals they are. Or do we see Jesus on our own level, knelling down to touch someone who is sick or lame. I don't know that this is an either/or option, but today, in Luke's Gospel, the emphasis is on the Jesus with us, face-to-face, on the ground. Jesus 'lifted up His eyes', Jesus looked up to His disciples. What is the implication for those listening to Jesus when He looks up to them? What is the implication for us when hearing the words of Jesus, He is looking up to us?

There is no doubt that Jesus' words are difficult. There are blessings and woes. Blessings in times when life is hard, because God has not forgotten us. Woes for times when we've taken our eye off the ball, we've trusted in our own strength, or isolated ourselves from the troubles of our world, looking to our own needs first rather than those of anyone else. What a difference perspective makes. Matthew's Jesus looks down and invites us to see the big picture, and catch the grand vision. Luke's Jesus looks up at us, and asks us 'what are you doing, right at this very minute, to demonstrate what you believe by your thinking and planning, by your speaking and actions? People are sick, and lonely, and desperate, and afraid. People don't have warm clothes to wear, or enough food to eat. People are crying out for someone to notice them, and acknowledge they

are here. People are aching for hope. Jesus is asking, it seems to me, will you get down here with Me and help?

To be blessed is to have a special place in God's heart, not merely to be happy. If you want anything to do with Jesus or the God Who sent Him, Luke says, you had better go and find the poor, the hungry, the captives, the blind, and the outcast, and join Jesus as Jesus cares for them. The way we know *who* is Jesus is to go *where* Jesus is, with the poor, the hungry, and the oppressed.ⁱ

On the BBC's Question Time last Thursday there was a fascinating debate about priorities and perspectives which have a direct faith implication. At the moment it is estimated that there are around 37,000 people arriving into our country in small boats, illegal immigrants. At the same time there are around 4 million children in the UK living in poverty. There are over 4.5 million people struggling to get a dentist's appointment. Yet 90% of the political and media discourse is focussed on 37,000 people. How much more could be achieved if we put that level of political and media discourse on to child poverty, on to the NHS, on to social care for the elderly and other vulnerable adults? Hospices in our city, and across the country, are having to restrict the number of beds in use because they don't have enough money to provide the support and the care that is needed by people approaching the end of life.

The asylum system and the necessary structure of processing immigrants and refugees may well be in a mess and needs fixing, as it has done for many, many years. But where, according to what we have heard in Luke's Gospel, in the Bible, do you think Jesus would be? Where is the gospel perspective focussed, for Jesus, and for His saints today? If we want to avoid the woes, where is the blessing? How do we attempt to put our Christian belief, faith, aspiration, intention, desire - into gritty, down on its knees, dirty-handed, faith-in-action reality and practice?

Blessings are not simply about aspirations to godliness and good theology - important though that is. Blessings is about being a community of saints today standing with the grieving, the poor, and the hungry of our land, the homeless and the refugee - as Jesus did. Blessings are about practising the presence of Jesus through acts of care and compassion. Luke insists that the Christian life begins with ministry, not only with belief. We have to know why it is we are inspired to be a Christian, to make that vital connection. We have to take that knowledge, that belief, that faith, and roll it into helping others.

Where is your help, your promise of utilising your time, talents and money, all promised when you became a member of the Church, where is that going to be at work today and in the days to come? Where will the feelgood factor of being in a wonderful service like this, with all the blessed things we enjoy on a Sunday, where will it take you in the days to come? Where will your practical contribution because of your faith make its impact and help even one other soul?

Luke's challenge in this Bible passage is for people like you and me, Christians now, or people on the road to faith, putting that faith into practice so that it makes a difference? Is our attitude to help, or to hinder? Is our aspiration unrealistic and not thought-through? Are we quicker to tear down and find fault than we are to build up and realistically affirm?

If we are people embellished by the blessings of God - how does that show in the way we live, and the way we treat others?

Our Christian faith has wonderful principles and precepts and theology, which is such a gift to help us think and wonder and imagine. But these must be rooted in some heavy-lifting when it comes to the way in which we live our lives. Our ethics, our behaviour patterns, our attitudes, our actions. Our Christian faith worships God in heaven, and also finds His Son Jesus on His knees on earth, helping and holding and healing and blessing.

Our Christian challenges us to love the unloveable, and to be the bigger person whenever we can, so that in the face of the cruel and the spiteful and the unjust, we may show a better way of life that may change them, or at least encourage other timid souls to stand up and do and be the right thing. Saints are the people who take to heart that devastatingly vital teaching of Jesus: "...as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them."

Unrealistic? Impossible? A counsel of perfection? Unattainable? Oh please God let it not be so. For this work of the saints, this blessed work of the saints, is not meant for superhumans. It is meant for ordinary souls like you and me. Go on, be a saint today, and the day after, and the day after that. Be blessed!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ E Elizabeth Johnson, *Feasting on the Word, Year C Vol 4*, p239