

CHESTER CATHEDRAL 11.30am Mattins 29.10.11 All Saints'
Sunday
Canon Chris Humphries
Isaiah 35 The Redeemed return to Zion; Luke 9 v 18 – 27 Take up your
Cross

Here's part of a rhyme for All Saints by Ian Fraser:

“The Saints of God are down our street
And round God's throne of light.
There's some with most amazing minds,
while some in crafts delight;
Together in God's family
Their different gifts unite.

They serve at check-outs, empty bins,
They teach and make and mend;
They feed the hungry back from school,
The victimised defend;
to voiceless folk they lend an ear
and strangers find a friend.”

The tone is light, but the point is well made: All Saints is a festival to celebrate Christians of the past but also of the present. Not necessarily famous or renowned, but a kind of living patchwork of the love and light of Jesus Christ seen in human lives. And you and I are most definitely included.

All Saints... a wonderful opportunity each year to take stock of literally millions of ordinary and extraordinary people down the ages who have borne the name Christian. To recognise that they are our brothers and sisters in Christ, every race and colour, from every land. We might even try to push the boundaries of our minds and of the definition of Saint. For instance do Old Testament patriarchs and prophets qualify?
Was Abraham a saint, or Isaiah?

Because Isaiah lived before the coming of Jesus Christ to this earth, logic might dictate that an Old Testament prophet cannot be a Christian saint. But in terms of preparing the way for God's Messiah, just listen to a couple of verses from today's first reading: “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.” Isaiah is certainly part of the outworking of God's plan of salvation for the world,

and as such of course part of God's family. So the very concept of All Saints is bound to stretch the limitations of who is in and who is out. This is the God of Love we're talking about.

"The Saints of God are down our street" says Ian Fraser. And for the purposes of this sermon, the saints of God are in these pews and stalls. Here are the Saints of today. Not statues or paintings or portraits in stained glass, but gathered here together to worship God, to listen to the teaching of his holy word, so that we might go out to bring the love and light of Christ to others. Are you sure of your sainthood and saintliness? That's a naughty way of putting it because it might imply that being a saint requires us to attain a certain standard of holiness and righteousness. God help us all if that's true. Because saints aren't people who have never had a hair out of place and have lived perfect lives. There's certainly no pass mark to be a saint otherwise St. Paul wouldn't stand much chance what with all the believers in Christ that he had hunted down, many of them put to death, before his road to Damascus experience. No, quite simply saints are people in the past and the present who have "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." Or to put it another way... "Just as I am without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me." Its not so much a case of what I have done, as what God has done for me. So if you want to be a saint, its about being willing to recognise that God is indeed real, to admit that we need his saving power to transform our lives. And having turned to God, then to risk taking up our cross and following Jesus Christ. Just as he called his first disciples, so Jesus calls you and me, and Christians right across the world.

Here are 3 further clues to what it means to be a saint:

First of all, Saint means "set apart", that's the original meaning of the word. "Set apart"...that doesn't mean that we all have to become monks and nuns though God does call some to serve him in that way. Neither does it mean that we are a holy huddle or religious clique. It doesn't mean being , as someone put it "so heavenly minded that we're no earthly good." But the prayer of St Francis might provide us with a good starting point. "Make me a channel of your peace, where there is hatred let me bring your love." Now we're getting somewhere. Set apart, dedicated for God's love to flow through us. Not hiding away but being channels for God, so his love can touch the lives of those around us by the practical action and unselfish caring that we demonstrate. No better example in recent times than Mother Teresa. Yes, of course she lived a regular disciplined life of prayer but see what action it always led to, connecting her with suffering humanity. And us? If we listen to God, what action

will he call us to? Set apart... to worship God, to make room for him in our busy lives, and to serve him wholeheartedly and joyfully.

Secondly, its good to realise that not all sanits are carbon copies of each other. Ian Fraser again: "together in God's family their different gifts unite." The best artists portray the saints differently, the portrayals of the apostles in the floor around this lectern try to bring out different characteristics of those who first responded to the call of Jesus. Indeed they were all so very different, fishermen, zealots, tax collectors, outgoing and assertive, introverted and thoughtful. That's the way God plans it. Bakers and bankers, social workers and salesmen, soldiers, nursery teachers, house wives or house husbands.

But although we may all be so different, the common factor is our belief and trust in Jesus Christ, we belong together in him. Or to put it more simply and more strongly, we are one in Christ. We're far from being a monochrome group of people, with all differences ironed out... indeed it's the glory of the church that we recognise and appreciate each other's differences. That will save us from disunity and schism. It will keep us centred on that which unites us and binds us together as All Saints.

Above all, and this is the final point, Saints are people of vision. That means that they have their eyes open to se what God is doing, and then they join in. So if you want to be a saint, look around you with the eyes of Christ. You may be surprised what you will see. When I was in York, I got to know an ex-convict who had become a Christian. After this change in his life he literally began to see things differently. One of the first things he noticed was a beautiful silver birch tree that grew at the bottom of his garden. His eyes were now open, open to the fullness of the world around him, the world God had created. One of the next things that he noticed was that many of his old friends were without this new life that he had found, and so for a while he went round his old haunts and shared his new found faith with his friends. Some listened, some didn't. But the lives of some were changed and other peoples eyes were opened. Back to the words of Isaiah "Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened." So a saint tries to look at the world through the eyes of God, uses the lens of the Holy Spirit to bring out the true contrasts and definition, and a clear perspective on life, and how God is very much at work in this world.

So what do you reckon? Are you a saint? How do we grow as saints? If you believe and trust, if you are open to receive God's guidance and blessings in your life then you're a saint. Saints Alive! Saints Alive! That's a good phrase because there can't be any other sort of saint. With eyes wide open to the world and its need. Joyful in the community of saints, glad of the variety and differences among us, and "set apart" called

and enabled to serve God in the world around and to bring his love to all people.

“Take up your cross and follow me”??

The last two verses of Ian Fraser’s rhyme are helpful here, and with these I’ll finish...

“Their efforts gain no accolades,
They simply earn that grace
Which heals this world of many sores,
Renews its battered face –
Through such, who live and love and care
In their own time and place.

When death comes knocking at their door
They’ll look at Christ askance –
How could such ordinary lives
His kingdom ends advance?
But Christ will say “Its party time –
Come, friends, and join my dance!”