

## **‘What saints are not’ – A homily for All Saints**

*Revelation 7.9-end*

*1 John 3.1-3*

*Matthew 5.1-12*

In *Man of Steel* as Superman begins to explore his powers, he hears the voice of his father speaking. He is told to keep testing his limits, to fly ever further ever higher. ‘You will give the people of earth an ideal to strive towards, they will race behind you, they will stumble, they will fall, but in time they will join you in the sun... in time you will help them accomplish wonders.’ In the films that follow the question is asked again and again, how can humanity cope with a god in their midst, can they trust him or does his power only heighten their sense of smallness, of frailty, of vulnerability?

Sometimes our Scriptures seem to paint a portrait of the saints as just this sort of person, heavenly visitors with miraculous powers, individuals with the charisma and power to divert history, those who float above the struggles of life, holy and moral, beyond the merely human. And so our Old Testament saints can make water gush from rocks and part the waters of the swirling seas, they can call down fire from heaven to burn up their enemies, they can make axes float and command the chariots of heaven. And those of the New Testament can be equally spectacular: out-running chariots, teleporting here and there, bitten by snakes without succumbing to their poison, healing the sick and even raising the dead.

But if we look again at these biblical saints a surprisingly human picture emerges alongside the miraculous and the holy: Abraham, ‘the Father of Faith,’ gets his Egyptian slave-girl pregnant and then allows her and her new born son to be sent into the desert to die; Moses never quite makes it to the Promised Land, but dies on the edges of it, somewhat caught between hope and bitterness, David, supposedly ‘a man after God’s own heart,’ uses his power to abuse a woman, has her husband killed and has to lament the

death of his own rebellious son in some of the most tragic prose our Scripture has to offer us. And our New Testament saints fare no better. Peter stumbles onto the water after Jesus, but his own lack of faith causes him to sink into the swirling waves, and finally he fails to even acknowledge Jesus as he dies upon the cross, and as the cock crows his heart breaks. Or else 'the Sons of Thunder' follow Jesus all the way to Jerusalem, only caring to ask if they can take their place at his right hand in his kingdom. These are flawed wonder-workers indeed.

Apart from these Scriptural stories, full of promise and hope, darkness and despair, miracle and misdemeanour, some of my favourite stories of the saints come from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*. Written in the Eighth Century this is a wonderful story about Pope Gregory's sending of Augustine to Britain and the gradual morphing of the Celtic Church into a more centralised Roman one. Bede's depictions of the local Celtic saints, Aidan of Northumbria, Chad, Cuthbert and others, is not so much that of heavenly visitors, but rather of those who live more deeply and intensely in their world. They are holy because of their ordinariness, and God can work his miracles through them because of they are humble enough to get out of his way. These are not people who are the champions and heroes of their own narratives, but somehow their ordinariness becomes a sign of what we might call 'the beauty of holiness.'

Bede contrasts the simplicity and pastoral nature of Aidan and his fellows to the pomposity and splendour of the contemporary church's bishops. 'Aidan refuses to ride on horseback so as to give himself the chance of causal pastoral encounters; he does not buy in to the elaborate rituals of courting the great or wealthy; he presses the kings and magnates of the region to give to the poor and uses donations of money for the relief of poverty and hunger and the buying back of those sold in slavery.' These humble and simple folk by their very ordinary acts of kindness and generosity, and by being alert to the needs of others, open the way for God's action in even the seemingly most insignificant of human encounters.

Our Gospel reading today gives us a surprising portrait of what the life of a saint might be. It isn't heroic or earth-shattering, it isn't particularly miraculous, it isn't even something we would notice. It is a life characterised by a certain poverty of spirit, a life opened out to suffering and grief, a life desirous of justice and compassion, a life of gentle forgiveness, a life of meekness and humility. It's doubtful whether such a life would even reach the headlines in our world today, but just this kind of life, Jesus says, is the life that is blessed. Just this kind of life shows us what the 'kingdom of heaven' looks like.

Today Hunter is brought to the waters of baptism. A little baby boy with his whole life ahead of him, plunged right into the middle of Christ's own life, with a cross painted on his forehead, the oil of chrism poured upon his brow and a candle of light in his hand. These little and very earthy signs – water and oil, wax and flame – are little signs of what really matters in life: not a heroic life lived in miraculous triumph, but a life of gentle refreshment and nourishment to others, a life to light the way for others, a life of healing and of peace. These signs show Hunter and they show us, what it really means to be a saint. AMEN.