

From the Trinity Pulpit

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Patrick C. Ward

November 3, 2019

Hymn 293 & Luke 6:20-31

“For the Saints of God are just folk like me....and I mean to be one too.”

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

“You can meet them in school. Or in lanes, or at sea,

Or in church, or in trains, or at shops, or at tea!

For the Saints of God are just folk like me, and I mean to be one too.”

In the Episcopal Church, we sing this hymn every year on this November Sunday.

It is as strong a tradition as *Silent Night* on Christmas Eve,

or *Jesus Christ is Risen Today* on Easter Sunday.

I love to sing it!

Maybe you do too.

For one thing, it’s almost comically British!

Lately, Maggie Smith as the Dowager Countess of Grantham seems to pop into my mind’s eye for an instant

when I find myself singing about trains and shops and tea.

One of many faces this hymn conjures.

But more to the point,

it’s in synch with the Anglican understanding that sainthood

is not bestowed by any earthly authority,

but includes those whose lives have made God’s kingdom believable in every age.

[PAUSE]



Some of these names are known to us: Saint Paul, St. Teresa of Avila, Saint Francis.

Some of them are known to God alone.

“Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,”

wrote Thomas Grey in his “Elegy, Written in a Country Churchyard.”¹

The big idea is that there are hundreds of thousands still.

The big idea is that they are with us now, all the living and the dead.

You know, every single one of our major feasts in the church asks us to give our hearts to something both in this world and out of this world.

On Christmas Eve we celebrate God’s Word of love made flesh.

On Easter Sunday we celebrate the death of death.

Every year, as November begins,

as here in New England the leaves die and the light fades and the days grow cold,

we celebrate the twin feasts of All Saints and All Souls.

The permanent and mystical communion of All the Living and the Dead.

ALL Saints.

ALL the Faithful Departed.

Nothing and no one lost in the changeless light of God.

[PAUSE]

As fond as I am, though, of imagining those good Saints sipping their tea,

I wonder sometimes if we’re not selling sainthood on the cheap.

If we can *all* plan on sainthood, after all, what’s so great about being one?

Author Gretchen Wolf Pritchard,

in her classic book *Offering the Gospel to Children*,

wonders if we are not in danger of reducing the word “saint”

to a mere synonym for “nice person,” and of reducing this feast day

to a kind of happy clappy celebration of everyone’s unique gifts!

“We are all saints,” writes Pritchard, not because we are *nice* but because
“in our baptism we have put on Christ and asked him to conform us
to his life of love, struggle, sacrifice and vindication,
which is the pattern of our lives and the life of the people of God.”²

[PAUSE]

We have put on Christ in baptism.

Put on Christ.

The great poet Gerard Manly Hopkins, puts it this way:

“For Christ plays in ten thousand places, Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his.”³

Maybe this is the big idea to sainthood,

and to why this day is one of the best possible days on which to baptize,

or to renew our own baptismal vows.

In these actions we choose Christ, and as Wolf Pritchard said, ‘we ask him to conform us to his life of love, struggle, sacrifice and vindication.’

God in Christ conforms or shapes *us*.

In other words, we are not in this alone.

It’s not as if Marlow and Ilaria and Giorgio and Chloe, baptized here this morning,

have been enrolled in a sort of lifelong course of continuous and solitary self-improvement.

What's happened is that they have been welcomed into something we think of as the household of God.

Into the gathered body of Christ.

A place where, we pray, they will be known and loved, where they will know and love others,

And where they will be made more and more into their truest selves,

Made in the image of God,

Made for community,

Made to repeat the sounding joy of being alive in the world,

made to love and to eventually find their deepest joy in giving.

made to make the world, or their part of the world, somehow and in some way new.

A world made new.

All Saints.

All Souls.

Now here is the genuinely challenging part:

The covenant we have just renewed together is just as expansive,

asking us, as it does, to serve Christ in **all** persons.

To respect the dignity of **every** human person.

Not simply those we happen to like or admire or will vote for.

Not simply those in our own communities and tribes.

Love your enemies too, says Jesus to us this morning in his sermon on the plain.

Do good to those who hate you.

Bless those who curse you.

And perhaps hardest of all, pray for those who abuse you.

To love, to do good, to bless, to pray for those who wish us harm is a tall, perhaps an impossible order.

But in these last moments this morning I'd like to look with you at one item from the news of this past week, and see what we might make of these behaviors Jesus models and tries to encourage in us.

We are all saints, says Gretchen Wolff Pritchard, not because we are **nice**.

We are saints because we have put on Christ.

These are sometimes not the same things at all.

The love undergirding the strides for justice and peace, the love undergirding respect for the dignity of all persons, may not always seem nice.

Reflecting this week on the death of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and graphic accounts of that death that have circulated broadly,

Florida Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin, in an opinion column for the religion news service, retells an ancient rabbinic legend.

According to this tradition, when the Israelites saw their oppressors lying dead upon the shore, the angels burst into song.

God rebukes and silences the angels with these words: “The work of my hands is drowning in the sea, and you are filled with song!?!”

[PAUSE]

What is at stake here of course, and in a very hard way, are these values we have just proclaimed this morning.

The call to serve Christ in all persons.

The dignity of every human being.

[PAUSE]

“No one should die like a dog,” insists Rabbi Salkin.

And, he submits, “I am glad that al-Baghdadi is no longer among the living.”

“How we deal with his death,” he concludes, “and the postures that we bring to that death — that is on us.

Those decisions shape the fate of our civilization and make it worthy of defense against the likes of ISIS.”⁴

The dignity of every human being.

Bless those who curse you.

Pray for those who abuse you.

You can meet *them* in church or in shops or at tea.

Or, for that matter, on the evening news or in the pages of the *New York Times*.

And, saints, **how** you meet them,

And **how** you pray for them,

And **how** you bless them may not have the shape of “nice.”

But it can begin to make our exhausted and weary world new.

Not because we are *nice* but because

“in our baptism we have put on Christ and asked him to conform us
to his life of love, struggle, sacrifice and vindication,

which is the pattern of our lives and the life of the people of God.”

[PAUSE]

And I mean to be one too.

Endnotes

- 1 Excerpted from “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” by Thomas Gray; full text available at <https://www.bartleby.com/101/453.html>
- 2 Pritchard, Gretchen Wolff, *Offering the Gospel to Children* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications) 1992, p. 104
- 3 Excerpted from “As Kingfishers Catch Fire” by Gerard Manly Hopkins; full text available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44389/as-kingfishers-catch->
- 4 Jeffrey Salkin, “For our own sake, no one should ‘die like a dog’” October 29, 2019 https://religionnews.com/2019/10/28/isis-al-baghdadi-trump/?fbclid=IwAR3H6GLXBQrVawovgDD5-H8Us2zO1fOv4LffYCY_BZ5Wc2xZLkQvJRTuqIo