

If you're wondering what today's first reading is about, you're not alone. Quite often we get a passage with a bit left out, and today the twelve verses left out of the middle of the reading are longer than the seven verses we do get. As so often, the middle is essential to enable us to understand the rest of it – but as I've only got a few minutes up here I'm not going to try to explain. There is one valuable bit, and I'll come back to that later.

All Saints Sunday could be described as the beginning of the end. No more Sundays After Trinity, no more 'ordinary time'; it's a summing-up, a conclusion of the Christian year. We've moved gradually from the story of Jesus's life, through the commemoration of others with important parts to play: his parents, the disciples, other companions and the leaders of the earliest Christian communities, and we've arrived at a consideration of all Christians. This is All Saints.

If we think about saints, they come in various categories. There are the really well-known ones, like the apostles, Francis, Catherine (two of these), Patrick, Augustine (two of these, too) and so on. Then there are the less well-documented ones, St Nicholas, St Lucy, or St Raymond Nonnatus, for example, where a variety of legends has grown up around someone who probably did live a holy life. (I bet most people don't know why the convent in 'Call the Midwife' is called Nonnatus House.) And then there is a huge number whose legends are so unlikely that they probably never existed at all – maybe they were drawn from a local folk tradition or from a mis-hearing of some other story. St Eustace, St Valentine and St Margaret of Antioch would all feature here, even though people have venerated them for centuries. But there is a fourth category as well. It doesn't appear in any dictionary of saints, but gets lots of mentions in the New Testament. It's quite clear from Acts and the Epistles that, in the very early days of the first Christian communities, all Christians were referred to as saints. Paul uses this word a lot.

'I locked up so many of the saints in prison' – describing how he behaved before his conversion.

'To all of God's beloved in Rome who are called to be saints' – starting a letter to the Christians in Rome, and he writes in the same way to groups in other places as well.

'Contribute to the needs of the saints' – when he is asking the communities to support each other and their poorer members.

'You are citizens with the saints and members of the household of God' – because they have believed and been saved through God's grace.

It's a long story to describe how we got from there to our present understanding. Church authorities gradually 'cordoned off' people they considered to be especially holy, and officially designated them as saints. People were made to feel too insignificant (and too wicked) to pray to God or to Jesus directly, and they were encouraged to pray to the saints who might then put in a good word on their behalf, or even – very rarely – perform a miracle directly. The Roman Catholic Church still canonises new saints, as it did with Cardinal Newman, three nuns and a Franciscan oblate a few weeks ago. The rest of us are sinners, and must look to the real saints to see how we ought to live and how far we fall short. This is a complete misunderstanding. It's very clear, if we look at the lives and behaviours of the best-documented saints, that they were acutely aware that they were sinners. Even after they had a conversion experience (think of St Ignatius or St Augustine of Hippo, for example), they knew that they still sinned. They could still be unkind or unfair, proud, angry or arrogant, and they still needed to examine their consciences and ask God for forgiveness.

I'm not arguing for a moment that we are not sinners, or that we should not look to the saints as examples. But St Paul also talks about the cloud of witnesses who surround us; not just the heroes and heroines of the Bible but countless people down the centuries, mostly unknown, who have also struggled hard to lead a Christian life. They are to be our inspiration too: not just martyrs thrown to the lions, hermits in caves in the desert, monks living frighteningly ascetic lives or women trying to avoid or escape from imposed or cruel marriages. Many of them were people like us. I want to reclaim sainthood for people like us. Saints can also be ordinary people living Christian lives in ordinary circumstances; people who have a living and active relationship with God and who work – probably very unobtrusively – to make their corner of the world a little more like the kingdom of heaven.

We can all think of people who, in one way or another, have been saints for us. Maybe a teacher, a colleague, someone completely unknown who went out of their way to help when we were in trouble, or a friend with whom we could talk openly about what God was doing in our lives. Probably they were not an 'officially' religious person. They might not even have been obviously Christian. Maybe that person next to you on the bus, or the homeless man who turns up to the night shelter is a saint. You may never know, but it makes sense to treat them with respect and dignity. The person sitting next to you now is a saint: they are here because Sunday worship is an important part of their life as a Christian. Logically, therefore, you also can be a saint.

That is a truly alarming idea. Did you immediately think: 'No – not me. Don't be silly. I'm not good enough.' But you are already on the way. You've each taken the first and most important steps; you are here, you are trying honestly to believe in God and follow Jesus, and you are doing this in the company of the rest of us, just like those first little communities of saints that St Paul nurtured. We must behave as he prescribed: praying together, working at our faith and encouraging each other, supporting and forgiving each other, so that we reach our goal. As that excerpt from Daniel says: 'The holy ones of the Most High shall receive and possess the kingdom for ever.' Or as Paul describes our inheritance from Christ: 'You are citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.' Today we acknowledge and celebrate all the saints, and we are included.