

‘Make us to be numbered with your saints, in glory everlasting.’

Just occasionally my computer makes me laugh. Not often – I am much more likely to be muttering at it, or shouting at the screen when the whole thing goes down in the middle of an important Zoom call. But yesterday I laughed. I was suffering momentary brain fade (which I hope was only temporary) and wanted to track down the source of the sentence which is the theme for this sermon. So I Googled it, and the first result that came up read: ‘Create a numbered or bullet-pointed list in Microsoft Word.’ Suddenly I could see a numbered or bullet-pointed list of all the saints, hundreds of thousands of them, some of whom were disputing their position in the list – St Felix of Nola arguing that he should be higher up than St Cunibert of Cologne because he made more converts. But no, of course not, they are all saints, all streaming in through the gates of pearl. There’s room for everyone in heaven.

Enough of this. ‘Make us to be numbered with your saints.’ It sounds a pretty hopeless prayer. After all, the saints were exceptionally holy people. There are fascinating stories about them, but they are just not people like us. They seem remote, even fantastical. (Some of them almost certainly are fantastical; the product of fertile imaginations, much-garbled legends and even the understandable desire to attract paying pilgrims to a particular chapel or monastery.) Some of them are safely remote – times and cultures have changed. Sitting on pillars, eating nothing but onions and standing all night naked in the sea to pray are out of fashion these days. It’s all too easy to see them as so different to us that, although we are supposed to take them as role models, it would be impossible to follow their examples.

We forget that many of the saints for whom there is solid, well-attested evidence started off living extremely ordinary lives just like us, or possibly even less decently. St Ignatius was an enthusiastic member of the licentious soldiery. St Hubert skipped church on Good Friday and went hunting instead. St Francis was a rich, high-living young man. St Vladimir was a pagan Viking who indulged in rape and pillage. St Augustine had a mistress for fifteen years and an illegitimate son. St Paul famously persecuted Christians. None of them were in any way holy. Why did they change? Each of them in some way heard about Jesus, and the message made such an impact on them that they realised their current existence was worthless and resolved to follow a ‘more excellent way’.

Nor did they necessarily get it right first time. Our own St Peter said the wrong things, misunderstood, acted too impulsively and even lied. But his repentance was genuine; he kept trying, and eventually he lived up to the expectations Jesus had of him. The saints were like us: busy, tempted, confused, immersed in everyday life. But what made the difference was that someone told them about Jesus, pointed them towards him, gave them something to read about him or was simply an inspiring example. Even St Paul, to whom Jesus spoke directly while he was on the way to hunt down and imprison Christians, spent time talking and learning with the faithful in Damascus and Jerusalem before setting out as a missionary. The desert Fathers, many of whom lived as hermits, visited each other occasionally for confession and conversation. None of the saints did it alone, and despite all those marvellous conversion stories, none of them became holy in an instant. In every case it was a journey that lasted for the rest of their lives. They heard about Jesus, committed themselves to love and follow him, and worked and prayed for the coming of the Kingdom.

‘Make us to be numbered with your saints.’ If that is our heartfelt prayer, we must recognise its implications. If all Christians are potential saints, as St Paul says, and if many of the saints lived pretty disreputable lives before committing themselves to Jesus, and if we have made a similar commitment (which presumably we have, as we are here this morning), then we have some hard thinking to do. Are we doing our utmost to live a holy life now? Honestly? If not, what must we change?

We can’t argue that saints didn’t have to contend with the complexities of modern life. Every age has its own problems. Nor can we say that we can’t be holy because we live and work in a secular environment. That excuse was firmly squashed in the fourth century. St Anthony of Egypt, one of the founders of monasticism, was shown a man who was his spiritual equal – a doctor living in a nearby city who gave to the poor and prayed faithfully. Saints are people who do what God asks of them, in whatever walk of life they find themselves. A few have become famous, some are recognised just by people close to them, most are known only to God. They are inspiring examples of simplicity, generosity and tenacity, with a faith that survives challenge and difficulties. They may be healers – like Cicely Saunders founding the hospice movement, or promoting international peace like Dag Hammarskjöld, or rescuing people from besieged front-line villages in Ukraine like the London bus driver in Friday’s news, or volunteering at the local foodbank, or helping with the winter night shelter. Above all, they are people of prayer. They know what God wants them to do because they take the time to ask him, and to listen for his answer.

Today celebrates what they are and what we can be. Can we love God, and our neighbours, and our enemies? Have we the conviction, determination and courage to follow Jesus and work for the good of humanity? Could we – unknowingly – become an inspiration to others? Could we point someone to Jesus? Could we aspire to be among the humble, the peacemakers, the meek, the upright, the merciful, the honest, the persecuted, the pure, the generous? As the gospel tells us, they shall see God. Lord, make us to be numbered with your saints, in glory everlasting.