

ALL SAINTS' CELEBRATION

Matthew 5:43-48 [MW17-33]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Kaiwaka and Wellsford, Sunday 05 November 2017

Who is your favourite saint?

[invite/encourage people to talk about their 'favourite' saint or a saint they are inspired by, with one or two nearby. After a couple of minutes ask people to call out their saint ...]

We talked about our “favourite saints” because in the good old days before mass media, pop culture, movie and sports stars, saints were the 'poster people' who others admired and looked up to. The ones who people were inspired to act like. In some ways it might be a good thing if we went back there ...

You see looking back through history – from way, way back to the very recent – one thread runs through it all. It's the reason we have this yearly “All Saints' Celebration”; and it is this: the fact is that most saints have been inspired by the example of other saints. Most have been touched by what they heard and saw in others.

I came across this which perhaps helps explain – has anyone heard of Paul Rusesabagina? I hadn't either. He's not in the Church Calendar, but he is a saint:

Paul Rusesabagina is an African. He is the heroic hotel manager in Rwanda, and an engrossing movie named Hotel Rwanda was made about him. In 1994 Hutu militants began a brutal assault against their Tutsi neighbors. More than a million people were murdered, if you can image that horror. In the midst of this terrible slaughter over twelve hundred desperate people took refuge in Paul's hotel. Daily, Paul had to face down armed troops who wanted to invade the hotel and kill the occupants. Courageously, in peril of his own life, Paul defended and protected the refugees.

How did this modern saint get this way? Paul credits the example of two heroes, his father and Nelson Mandela. His father had been well respected in the community. He was a wise man and he always told the truth. When there were disputes in the community, the elders called on Paul's father to mediate. He was so honest that if one partner in a dispute was lying, they often confessed their lie as soon as they saw Paul's father. Then there's Nelson Mandela, former president of South Africa. He inspired Paul because of his long imprisonment and his use of nonviolence to bring peace between enemies. These two men were Paul's inspiration. Indeed, saints beget saints.

Paul Rusesabagina was inspired by two particular saints who are not found in any Church Calendar – though I suspect Nelson Mandela might be one day. So allow me to, I hope, inspire you by telling you about three other saints ... also not in the calendar!

Sister Mary Cleophas taught high school and college maths for fifty years. She made maths comprehensible and enjoyable for even the most reluctant student. When she could no longer teach, Sister found another ministry. She organized a group of people to collect day-old bread from a bakery and distribute it to the poor. When even this work became too much for Sister, she retired to her provincial house.

One day, a younger sister was walking quickly down the hall and passed Sister Cleophas shuffling along with her cane, her body bent from osteoporosis. Despite her frailty, the older nun greeted the younger one as she sped by. When the young nun reached the end of the hall she stopped, and going back to the bent figure, said, "Sister Cleophas, I want you to know how much your smile means to me." Without a trace of self-pity, Sister Cleophas said, "My smile is all I have left to give."

Then there is Joey Russell ...

Joey Russell's most prized possession used to be a 1912 postcard of the original Titanic, signed by an actual survivor of the ship's sinking. A few years ago, when he was nine years old, Joey had saved up all his pocket-money to buy the postcard at an auction. The mania surrounding the release of the movie about the Titanic assured Joey an excellent deal if he ever decided to sell his card.

And he did decide to sell it — but not for his own benefit. He saw something else; he saw that the mother of his best friend Kate needed a bone-marrow transplant. That's when Joey offered to sell his card to raise money for the procedure. The mother would need at least \$60,000 in order to get the transplant, and without it she might die. But it didn't stop there.

When talk show host Rosie O'Donnell heard about Joey's act of kindness, she invited him on her show. There, she introduced him to the cast of the musical Titanic. But that wasn't the only reason she had invited him on her show that day. O'Donnell, along with the Titanic's producers, had arranged to buy Joey's postcard for \$60,000. Now his best friend's mom could get her transplant.

Joey Russell could have seen all the things he could buy for himself with his Titanic postcard profits. But in the tradition of sainthood, he saw otherwise.

And finally a person who is not even named ...

The shocked family was standing on the sidewalk in front of their house, watching the firemen swarming in and out. A grease fire had severely damaged the kitchen and smoke was saturating everything they owned. They watched in dismay as the fire was put out — holes in the walls, scorched beams, broken dishes — a real mess awaited them.

Suddenly a pizza delivery car pulled up next to the curb, and a young man hopped out bearing a large pizza. The father of the family looked annoyed and said sharply, "Look I'm afraid you've got the wrong address. Obviously," gesturing toward the damaged house, "none of us ordered a pizza and, besides," he said wearily, "my wallet was in my jacket — in the kitchen."

The pizza guy smiled, shook his head, and said, "Oh, I know you didn't order this but I saw you all just standing there and I had to do something. There is no charge. Just try to take it easy and have something to eat." And with that he returned to his car and sped off as the astonished family watched.

How many saw the fire and just shook their heads or drove on? How many saw the people in need? At least one young man saw, and decided to do something about it. This qualifies him as a saint, at least for that day.

Any of the things these three people, these three saints, did ... we can do! Which means you can be a saint, and inspire others to be saints. And in a sense that's what the celebration of "All Saints" is all about.

Three things to remember and take away about saints:

1. A saint is someone through whom we catch a glimpse of God.
2. Saints see things differently — they see with the eyes of Christ.
3. Saints act like our Father in heaven

In our gospel reading Jesus said:

You have heard people say, "Love your neighbors and hate your enemies." But I tell you to love your enemies and pray for anyone who mistreats you. Then you will be acting like your Father in heaven. He makes the sun rise on both good and bad people. And he sends rain for the ones who do right and for the ones who do wrong. If you love only those people who love you, will God reward you for that? Even tax collectors love their friends. If you greet only your friends, what's so great about that? Don't even unbelievers do that? But you must always act like your Father in heaven.

We can do that.

We can do that and be the saints of today ... and tomorrow ...