

ALL SAINTS' CELEBRATION

Revelation 7: 9-17, Luke 6: 32-36 [MW18-35]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai & Wellsford, Sunday 04 November 2018

Here are a couple of my favourite lines about saints:

*To live above with the saints we love, that will be the glory
but to live below with the saints we know, ah, that's a different story*

Definition of a saint: a dead sinner, revised and edited

So, who then are the saints?

- there are some we might be able to name like ... Matthew, Mark, Peter Patrick, Francis, Clare, Teresa
and there's a whole heap listed in the front of our Prayer Books (p.14-25)
- although officially "All Saints' Day" is November the first, we are marking it today a day when we remember all these saints, and something else as well

How many of you have heard of St Symeon (with a "y") the new theologian?

This is what he has to say about the saints:

The saints in each generation, joined to those who have gone before and filled like them, with light, become a golden chain in which each saint is a separate link united to the next by faith and works and love. So in the end they form a single chain which cannot quickly be broken.

So, who are the saints? Who are the saints that make up this golden chain?

- in the New Testament "the faithful" are called saints
generally the term "saints" describes the Christian community
Christians are "saints" by virtue of being "in Christ Jesus", the body of Christ
- followers of Jesus have a vocation, a way of life, as consecrated or set apart people
their calling implies a high ethical standard
- the term "saints" is particularly associated with the love shown by Christians to one another, and demonstrated in practical service

As the Christian tradition developed

- particular honour began to be paid to exceptional examples of the Christian way
especially those who died for the faith, the martyrs
- this links with our reading from Revelation chapter 7
describing those who would be especially set apart
- and the great crowd of saints
so many from every nation, tribe and language
that they could not be counted
- the ones who have come through the great ordeal, who stood firm under trial
who faced all kinds of trouble, affliction, persecution
because they were followers of Jesus
- they did not turn aside or give up
and now they are pictured as victorious

These are traditionally thought of as martyrs

- people who gave their lives in the cause of following Jesus
and originally "All Saints' Day" was a special time to honour the martyrs of the world
- in later centuries this celebration was enlarged
to include not just all martyrs, but all saints

For me this is an important point about All Saints' Day

- it is not just a one particular type of action or event that is being remembered and it is especially not only for those saints with a capital "S" they've already got their name and their date in the calendar of saints
- All Saints' Day is for those faithful followers who never made it into the calendar and probably never will
- although their names and deeds may not be widely known they deserve to be honoured and remembered
- this is their day too!

So on this All Saints' celebration I'm going to share with you briefly something of the life and deeds of three saints

Anybody heard of St Polycarp?

- I hadn't until my first year of church history at Theological College Polycarp was Bishop of Smyrna, now Izmir in Turkey
- for many years he travelled the country preaching the word of Christ comforting and encouraging his flock
- then when he was a very old man the Roman soldiers came for him and took him before the Governor:

"Listen my friend," said the Governor, "you have one God, we have many ... Jupiter, Mars, Mithras. Pay homage to our Emperor's statue with incense as we all do. Renounce your Christ and I will have you released. It is very little to ask."

Polycarp's stooping figure, old white haired, made a striking contrast to the elegant Governor dressed in his fine robes. "Little to ask," Polycarp repeated. "My lord Governor, I have served Christ all my life. He has stood by me in all my 86 years. How can you expect me to desert him now?"

Polycarp was led out to the crowd who cried, "Burn him! Burn the Christian Polycarp!" Wood and straw were piled high. A platform made and the Bishop placed on it. As the fire blazed and the crowd danced, Polycarp died; his hands clasped together in prayer.

His example and courage, and that of hundreds like him – many whose names are lost in history – led the Romans themselves to become followers of Jesus.

Coming forward to 1836 and our own country we have the story of Tarore:

Tarore was the daughter of Ngakuku, the Ngati Haua chief. She was a keen student at Matamata mission station where she learned to read. Tragically on October 19, 1836 she was killed during a raid. She was only 12 years old and her death created a desire for utu – revenge. But at her tangi, her father preached forgiveness.

Luke's gospel, which Tarore had used as a pillow on the night she died, was taken by one of the raiding party, Uita. Some time later this gospel was read to the people and led to a reconciliation between Uita and Ngakuku. After this, Tarore's copy of Luke's gospel was taken to Otaki where the message it contained led Tamihana te Rauparaha and his cousin Matene Te Whiti to become followers of Jesus.

It is said that Tamihana and Matene took Tarore's book with them when they travelled to the South Island, preaching the gospel of peace and reconciliation.

Finally, an incident which did not make any headlines

- but because of such people who act in this way there is good news to share, and faith and hope to be inspired by

Professor Bruce Riggins of McCormick Theological Seminary met a very dedicated Christian working in an amazing way with underprivileged people in London. He wanted to know what inspired her faith and action. She shared her story of how seeing another Christian's faith converted her.

She was a Jew fleeing the German Gestapo in France during World War 2. She knew she was close to being caught and wanted to give up. She came to the home of a French Huguenot. A widow lady came to that home to say that it was time to flee to a new place. The Jewish lady said, "It's no use, they will find me anyway. They are so close behind." The Christian widow said, "Yes, they will find someone here, but it's time for you to leave. Go with these people to safety. I will take your identification and wait here."

The Jewish lady then understood the plan: the Gestapo would come and find this Christian widow and think she was the fleeing Jew.

The Christian lady of Jewish descent looked Professor Riggins in the eye and said, "I asked her why she was doing that and the widow responded, 'It's the least I can do; Christ has already done that and more for me.'" The widow was caught and imprisoned, allowing the Jewish lady time to escape. Within six months the Christian widow was dead in the concentration camp.

The Jewish lady never forgot that. She too became a follower of Jesus and lived her life serving others.

Who are the saints?

- those who stand up and who are not afraid to be counted as followers of Jesus perhaps like me, your lives have been affected by a particular saint or saints either from history or that you have met
- saints are the signs of God with us through their lives the love and power of God shines through
- they know God is with them, giving them grace and strength and courage to face the particular challenges of their age
- as we remember them, may it give us grace and strength and courage to face the particular challenges of our time

Who are the saints ... ???

- pause
you, me, we are the saints
- we have had the Good News passed on to us
we have had the faith and hope inspired by Jesus passed on to us
- the task before us, the call to us
is to share and pass this on
to take our place as "links in that golden chain"

Perhaps the challenge that this All Saints' celebration lays before us is

- how are we passing on the faith and hope Jesus gives?
what are we doing to share the Good News?

This morning we recognise and give thanks for what it was worth

- to all those previous generations of saints
and the question that all this confronts me with is:
- what is it worth to me?
what is the Good News of faith and hope in Jesus, passed on by the saints worth to me?
- what am I prepared to lay down my life for?
what are you prepared to lay down your life for?

[pause for reflection]

Let us pray as we remember all saints

- those who have gone before us in faith, and in this place
- those we live among
- those who will come after us

*Almighty God,
we thank you for all the saints throughout the ages
who have kept the lamp of faith burning brightly.
Grant that we who are following in their steps
may keep that bright light shining
that others may see and follow
and the darkness of this world
be lit by the One who is the light of the world,
our Saviour, Jesus Christ.
Amen.*

At All Saints' Wellsford only:

St Symeon, remember him, he's the new Theologian??? said:

The saints in each generation, joined to those who have gone before and filled like them, with light, become a golden chain in which each saint is a separate link united to the next by faith and works and love. So in the end they form a single chain which cannot quickly be broken.

So let's do something to symbolise that

- to show we are the church, we are the saints
linked together
supporting and encouraging one another in our life
in following Jesus in faith
- hold hands and march together around our church ...