

All Saints 2017

In 1981 Marg and I moved to London. Between Christmas and New Years of that year we took a few days to tour around southeast England. On December 29, we found ourselves in Canterbury and went into the cathedral for an evening service. Turned out it was the feast day of St. Thomas a Becket and we joined in the veneration of the saint in that amazing setting of Canterbury Cathedral. Part way through the service we were surprised to realize it was a Roman Catholic service - the liturgy was so familiar we hadn't noticed anything different. After the mass, we processed down to the side chapel where he was assassinated, singing For all the Saints, who from their labours rest. Who thee, by faith, before the world confessed.

I don't know what you know about Thomas a Becket. He was the Archbishop of Canterbury in the mid 12th century, during the reign of Henry II. He and Henry were frequently at odds, mainly over issues of power – church versus king. After one particularly fraught disagreement, Henry was heard to mutter, “Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?” Three of his knights took him at his word and, deciding to do the king a favour, travelled to Canterbury and murdered Thomas. Henry, either willingly or not, subsequently paid a tremendous amount of penance to atone for the deed.

The church very quickly declared Thomas to be a Saint and his name is found in many places in England, even on the office building in which I worked – Becket House, on Lambeth Palace Road, ¼ mile from the official residence of the Archbishops of Canterbury from the 13th C onwards.

We are commemorating Thomas a Becket, along with untold numbers of other big-S, and small-s saints today on the feast day of All Saints. And, during the course of the year we commemorate other big-S Saints of the church. Feast days, collects, liturgies, prayers, special readings, church names, schools and hospitals, children's names. Some of us pray to the Saints for specific reasons and causes, asking them to intercede for us. Many of us do not. What does it mean to commemorate the Saints?

Anglicans and Lutherans have a somewhat strained relationship with the theology of Sainthood. That's the big-S Sainthood, I'm referring to. The Anglican Communion recognizes almost all the Saints canonized up to the time of the Reformation. But we haven't created any new ones. Instead in our church

calendar, we acknowledge individuals who have contributed significantly to the Kingdom of Heaven. We set them apart by naming some of them as heroes and heroines, but we recognize that they are in most ways the same as us, faithful followers of Jesus. Small-s saints, if you like.

Some in our church consider that we are all small-s saints, called and commissioned through our baptismal covenant to be vessels of God's grace, healing, justice and love for the world. If we had copies of the BAS available today, I'd refer you to pg 159, as reminder of our role as followers of Jesus. Hopefully as future members of the communion of saints.

Which ought to inspire us to live lives worthy of a saint – saintly lives, saintly behaviour.

Which brings us to the Beatitudes from today's Gospel. The Beatitudes, both in their original form and as they get re-presented and re-imagined by Jesus, again and again, and then also by how we choose to live, are words to guide and inspire us as we strive to follow Jesus.

Karoline Lewis, Associate Professor of Preaching at Luther Seminary interprets the impact of the Beatitudes like this:

As we mourn our dead, both personally and communally, these are words that give comfort and hope.

As we remember our dead who died at the hands of hate and violence, these are words that promise the presence of the Kingdom of Heaven here and now, and in our future.

As anti-Beatitude living becomes more acceptable, more normative, more regularized, these are words that call us out of our complacency and conformity.

As we continue to experience the effects of national and global trauma, of natural and human made disasters, these are words to believe in, to count on, to trust.

As we profess God, creator of the universe, and then take advantage of and abuse our earth, these words insist that the earth deserves justice, too.

As churches bask in celebrations of reformation, and yet continue to perpetuate practices that refute renewal and transformation, these are words that call us to account, that assert that the church can never stop reforming.

As the church contends that it is a place of safety and refuge, and then turns away those who have nowhere else to go, not lifting a finger to help, these words are quick to point out our charade.

As we call ourselves Christians, and yet remain silent about, and even deny, white privilege and racism, these are words that require our humility.

As we claim the worth of all human beings, and then sit back and stay silent about sexism or disbelieve claims of sexual harassment, these words empower us to reclaim our time.

As leaders, both political and pastoral, call themselves public servants, and then seek only their own gain, these are words that tell the truth, in no uncertain terms, of their pretense.

As church leaders and politicians call upon the name of God to justify their speech and actions, and yet disregard and displace the very persons Jesus loved so much, these words are straightforward -- they do not practice what they preach.

But...as we hear once again Jesus' words of blessedness and happiness, that those who humble themselves will be exalted, that we are called to lift the burdens of others and to liberate those who bear the weights of this world, we truly are blessed.

Saintly living requires us to be counter-cultural, stepping out of the norms of our society to reach for the ideals of Christian standards. It's worth recalling that most of the big-S Saints were counter-cultural people, who stood up to the pressures and expectations of the society around them and called society to account. It's not easy, but we have the most faithful one at our side as we believe, speak and act for the benefit of others.

It's always helpful hear some inspiring thoughts to help us in our roles as vessels of grace. So I'll end with words from one of the most recent Saints – St. Teresa of Calcutta. You probably know her as Mother Teresa:

People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered. Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies. Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you. Be honest and sincere anyway.

What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight. Create anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous. Be happy anyway.

The good you do today, will often be forgotten. Do good anyway.

Give the best you have, and it will never be enough. Give your best anyway.

May it be so. Amen.