

# THE REVD JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON

ALL SAINTS' DAY NOVEMBER 1 2020

REVELATION 7: 9-End

1 JOHN 3: 1-3

MATTHEW 5: 1-12



ST MATTHEW'S WESTMINSTER

"Grace and Peace from God our Father and The Lord Jesus Christ to all you Saints in the congregation of St Matthew's Westminster."

And to all you saints watching this service at home.

Please do not fall off your chairs with astonishment at being addressed as "Saints". And there is no need to start fumbling around above your heads in search of your halos.

Because the words I have just spoken were a familiar greeting among followers of Jesus in the early church. Indeed, St Paul uses almost those exact words of course, without mentioning St Matthew's Westminster, at the start of his letters to the Philippians and the Ephesians.

The term "Saints" was such a commonplace term that it appears 45 times in the New Testament.

And that's a helpful reminder of the scope of sainthood as we today celebrate ALL Saints' Day. This is one of the Church's great festivals. It is right up there – above the title, as they say in Theatreland – with Easter Day, Christmas Day and the Day of Pentecost.

Why? Why should All Saints' Day be so highly rated in the Church calendar?

As the word "Saint" simply means "Holy"

What then are the qualities of holiness that make a Saint – ancient or modern?

One of the problems in finding the answers is that the Church of the past has, for centuries, been in OTT overdrive about Saints, indulging in Saint inflation and Saint veneration. And Saint intervention of a holier than thou hierarchy of celebrity Saints.

None of this fits easily with our Lord's teachings on humility such as the Beatitude "Blessed are the meek" from this morning's Gospel reading.

So perhaps we need to fasten our spiritual seatbelts and come down from the stratospheric heights of ancient sainthood and take to a more realistic view of All Saints here and now, on the eve of lockdown when the national mood is more fearful than joyful.

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On Saint inflation, there are now well over 10,000 Canonised Saints in the Western Catholic Church, and the Eastern Orthodox Churches recognise twice that number.

A few years ago, I went on a pilgrimage to Mt Athos and while attending a High Mass at one of its great monasteries after the celebrant said "Let us now pray for today's Saints". The Greek Orthodox Cantor did not draw breath for over half an hour as he intoned their holy names at Formula One speed. Exhausting even to listen to.

But the Saints often were exhausting. As George Bernard Shaw wrote in his play *Saint Joan*:

"Saints in their lifetimes can be a thorough nuisance."

That is because they disrupt us, challenge our complacency and upset the comfortable status quo of our lives.

The status quo of my life has been upset so many times that I have had a far from saintly roller coaster ride through multiple activities, careers and occupations. I've had many failures, some fulfilments – all interesting.

One of my occupations, relevant to the lives of Saints, is that I have been a biographer. And when biographers research and write some prominent person's life story, they almost always discover recurrent themes of character and behaviour.

I have read enough histories of Saints to be able to detect certain characteristics which run like gold seams through their lives. Here are some of them:

Saints do not start as Saints. Many of them were troublesome and eccentric. Others were mega sinners.

Think of Saul of Tarsus, persecuting Christians, and stoning them to death before he encountered Jesus on the Road to Damascus and was transformed into Saint Paul, the great Apostle.

Or think of Augustine a wild, womanising, wine drinking hedonist until his mother's prayers and a mysterious voice saying: "Take up and read" started him reading the Bible and transformed him into the greatest theologian of the early church.

When such Saints have their lives set on fire with love for God, their holy energy blazes with passionate commitment.

Not for them the half-heartedness of some Sunday Christian and absentee members of today's Church reticent. No!

Authentic Saints, in the words of St. Ignatius of Loyola strive:

"To give and not to count the cost".

"To fight and not to heed the wounds"

They echo the adoring prayer of St Francis of Assisi "My God and my all".

They are hyper- energetic in God's service because as Augustine said:

"Love cannot be lazy".

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Our readings and hymns today tell us a great deal about the characteristics of Saints – both mystical and practical.

Our opening hymn invoked Bright Seraphs, Cherubim and Thrones.

Patriarchs, Prophets and Martyrs echoing supernal anthems.

Sounds like a musical extravaganza of great heavenly joy.

But by contrast the Beatitudes in today's Gospel take us into the darker territory where Saints do their practical work on earth:

Among the Suffering;

The Bereaved;

The Persecuted;

The Poor in Spirit;

The Reviled;

And in the evil conflicts which need Peace Makers.

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There is one core quality which runs through the lives of Saints – **GRACE.**

They often found it while getting their hands dirty in the real-life mud and grime of their ministry to the poor, the broken or the needy.

Saints understand their own need for God's Grace and they accept it with loving gratitude, penitence, prayer and holy action.

Are there Saints around us today? Yes, of course there are.

Even though they go largely unknown and unrecognised, we can still relate to them. Not because of their stained glass window piety. But because of their down to earth God inspired humanity.

Let me tell you a story about one alleged Saint of great humanity from the unfashionable world of prison ministry.

A few years ago, there was a Reverend Chaplain of Wormwood Scrubs Prison. He brought many of his flock to Christ, who prevented some of their suicides, and self-harmings. He was a bit of a rough diamond, but he was respected and loved for his kindness.

He was known as Father Pie because in prison rhyming slang "Pie and Liquor = Vicar".

Anyway, it is said that the Father Pie in this story died and arrived at the gates of heaven. His rough diamond private life has been rather racy to put it mildly, so he was put through a gruelling interview by St Peter.

This interview seemed to be going from bad to worse, as more and more of his sins were found in the book of the recording angel.

But just as Father Pie was certain that he would get the thumbs down sign, suddenly a man with a shaved head and heavily tattooed chest popped up from the walls of heaven.

"Oi, Peter, why is you giving Father Pie such a hard time? He demanded. "Don'tche know it's because of him that me and my best mates got here."

St Peter closed his book. "In you go, Father Pie" he said, waving him through the pearly gates.

As Catholic doctrine tells us that ALL the inhabitants of Heaven are Saints,

I guess Father Pie is sitting there complete with his halo and his harp.

If that's a surprise to him, it's the natural order of things in Heaven, where the last shall be first and whose population will be full of surprising Saints – starting with the Penitent Thief on the cross.

Now this may be an apocryphal story about Father Pie's reception at the gates of Heaven, but I suspect it tells us something rather profound about real life sainthood.

I was not joking, any more than St Paul was joking to the Philippians when I began by addressing this congregation as "You Saints" this morning.

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So let me challenge you by asking what kind of Saint are you called to be? To answer, you have to look into your heart and ask yourself some searching questions.

Can you love and serve others and not count the cost to yourself?

What acts of compassion and generosity will you perform today or tomorrow and throughout lockdown?

Can you, at the same time, radiate love, joy, peace, patience, goodness and kindness?

Can you be a beam of God's light and warmth in a world that is sometimes cold and dark?

In these dark and cold Covid19 times when so many people are lonely, fearful, and poor both materially and spiritually, the Church needs more Saints to respond to their needs.

Here at St Matthew's by the way we need a few more Saints to help us to make telephone calls of kindness to the old, the lonely and the vulnerable members of our community during lockdown. Any of you who feel like volunteering for this saintly task- please give your names to me or Father Philip after the Service.

The greatest problem of lockdown is fear of the unknown. We don't know what is going to happen next after watching yesterday's Press conference from No 10 Downing St, perhaps it seems that neither Government Ministers nor Government scientists (even though they are doing their best) know what is going to happen next either.

So how should Saints respond to this uncertainty and the encircling gloom of lockdown? We can get a suggestion from a recently canonised Saint John Henry Newman.



One of the many reasons he deserved his halo might be just for the sublime poetry and spiritual power of the words he wrote for that hymn the choir will sing for us during Communion. Harken to its opening verses:

*"Lead kindly light amid the encircling gloom  
Lead thou me on  
The night is dark and I am far from home  
Lead thou me on  
Keep thou my feet: I do not ask to see  
The distant scene: one step enough for me."*

In today's encircling gloom Newman's one step could be saying one simple three letter word. It is the only word we ever need with God.

The word is YES:

Yes, to God

Yes, to change

Yes, to love

Yes, to deeper prayer

Yes, to service

Yes, to an unknown and probably an uncomfortable future

Remember that was the response the Mother of All Saints, the Blessed Virgin Mary, when the angel asked her to bear God's child.

"Be it unto me according to thy word", she said.

Now, as then, the first step to sainthood is to say Yes to God. **Amen**