

BECOMING FULLY HUMAN

In one of his books, the former Dean of Westminster Michael Mayne, describes some of the ninety-five statues of saints in St Anne's Chapel in the Abbey. "They are vigorous masterpieces of the early sixteenth century", he writes. "There is Margaret of Antioch, with a cross in her hand and her foot resting on the head of a rather Disney-like grinning dragon. Beside her is St Dunstan holding the devil's nose with a pair of tongs, St Anthony with his pig, and St Roche with his dog. Then comes St Anne, teaching the Virgin Mary to read; a bespectacled St Philip; St Martin, giving alms to a beggar with wooden legs, and poor St Uncumber, who didn't want to marry the King of Sicily, prayed for a miracle and found she had grown a beard overnight, which was no doubt not quite what she had in mind but proved remarkably effective. They seem", he continues, "both familiar and remote. Familiar, because they are so full of character like Chaucer's pilgrims on their way to Canterbury, but as remote as those moon-like haloes that serve as their holy hats."

Great stuff. And, of course, he's right. At All Saints tide we shouldn't be focussing on medieval statues, however appealing, but thinking about real people of flesh-and-blood. So let's start not with haloes, but with what the halo represents. And that is about who we are as human beings and what we have it in us to become. All Saints tide is about what it takes to fulfil our human potential.

When the monk Thomas Merton told the story of his Christian journey, he described a particular moment on a street-corner in Louisville, Kentucky: "I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people; that we could not be alien to one another, even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, to take your place as a member of the race in which God himself became incarnate. If only everyone could realize this. But there is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."

And when they asked the painter Van Gogh why he painted as he did, he said it was because he wanted to show that human beings had something of the eternal about them.

We find ourselves living with a paradox. On the one hand, we have immortal longings, a sense that there is more to our lives that we can immediately discern, and yet, on the other, we know that we are all going to end up in the graveyard or the Crematorium as a handful of dust. Or will we? Physically, yes of course we will. But we are not just flesh and blood. Dust we may be, but it's a dust imbued with the restless, searching, creative spirit that we call soul. Each of us is an embodied spirit, with dreams that transcend our human limitations. All of us, I am sure, have experienced those fleeting moments when we sense that the superficial quality of much of our everyday lives is not what life is really about, and that our deepest happiness and our ultimate fulfilment lie in realities expressed in such words as hope and trust, wonder and forgiveness, compassion and love. Certainly, most of us will have experienced times when the darkness of life seems overwhelming, but all of us here have come together to share in this Eucharist because we dare to trust that there is a hope and a light to be found even in the darkest places. And that is because of the Christ-like God who was once made in our likeness and shared our pain and died our death, since when suffering and death have looked quite different.

So All Saints Day is really about our human potential and destiny. The real Saints are not stuck on stone pedestals or framed in Victorian stained glass windows. The real Saints are those who find in Jesus the human face of God, and then triumphantly live out what this implies in the context of their own lives and circumstances. They don't cease to be human. They are as fallible, vulnerable, and sometimes as aggravating as we all are. But they are those for whom there has been a real disclosure which has enabled them to see God, themselves and everyone else with new eyes. They have committed themselves, often heroically and triumphantly, to the way of love. Or rather, they have wanted to, for it's a long and difficult journey, and all that God asks of us is our wanting, not our achievement. "God doth not ask a perfect heart", said St Theresa, "but only infinite desire."

If you're like me, what makes Christian faith believable, is not so much Church doctrines or books of theology, as the way normal, ordinary people can be transformed by God's grace. My faith has been confirmed over and over again by the scores of ordinary yet wonderful people I have known who have revealed something

of Christ's love and care. Some have shown extraordinary courage and faith the face of illness or death, others a capacity for forgiveness or compassion that has been an inspiration; still others have exhibited exceptional generosity and kindness, others a willingness to go the extra mile on behalf of others. Whenever we see people triumphantly living out their faith and revealing in their lives and actions the love of God, we should recognize it for what it is, God's grace transforming human lives. They are showing us what human beings are capable of being and becoming.

And that needn't just be other people. Why not 'us'? St Paul always addresses those he is writing to as 'saints'. For him a saint is simply a sinner who has turned his or her face in a new direction, someone who is open to the transforming grace of God, open to the renewing and affirming spirit of Jesus. We all have it in us to become saints.

At All Saints tide we are not celebrating some heavenly House of Lords. We are celebrating people like us, people who have been baptised into the body of Christ and are therefore called to be saints. So today, remind yourself of those who have influenced you most. Those who have helped you along your life's journey. Who have shown you what generosity, what forgiveness mean in practice. People who have taken time to support and encourage you. People who have stayed with you, when others have not. People who have discerned your needs and have made sure that they have been met. These are your saints. Acknowledge them, remember them, and give thanks for them today. They are God's gift to you, a sign of what you have it in you to become.

And of course, they challenge you to be a saint for others in your turn. All around you are people waiting for you to be God's gift to them, as others have been for you. And if today we are especially celebrating and remembering those who have most obviously and most fully opened themselves to the spirit of Christ, that is simply because they show us our true potential as human beings made in God's likeness. We affirm them because they affirm us. They point us to our true destiny and they rekindle our hope.

Let me end with an All Saints poem by Malcolm Guite:

Thanksgiving starts with thanks for mere survival,
Just to have made it through another year
With everyone still breathing. But we share
So much beyond the outer roads we travel;
Our interweavings on a deeper level,
The modes of life embodied souls can share,
The unguessed blessings of our being here,
Threads of connection no one can unravel.
So I give thanks for our coinherence,
Inwoven in the web of God's own grace,
Pulling us through the grave and gate of death.
I thank him for the truth behind appearance,
I thank him for his light in every face,
I thank him for us all, with every breath.