

MAKING GOD REAL

Let me begin today by asking you a question: have you ever met a Saint?

I certainly hope you can answer “Yes” to that, because I’m 100% certain that you will have done, and it’s important to recognize the fact. Most of us have been fortunate enough to have met several in the course of our lives. Saints don’t exist in stained glass windows. They are real people with all sorts of different gifts and personalities, who revealed the grace of God to the people of their time. And our time is no different. But of course, to recognize a saint, you need to know what a saint is.

When Etty Hillesum, the young Jewish writer who died at Auschwitz, was on her way to the death camps, she hastily scribbled some notes to her friends. She wanted to explain what was going on. “In this situation”, she said, “someone has to behave as if God were real. Someone has to make God believable by the way they meet life and death.” In the last few months of her life she managed to do just that, as her friends and those who remembered her bear witness.

Witnesses establish the truth by giving evidence. When we celebrate the Saints, we celebrate those who have made God believable by how they have lived and how they have died. In the end, discussion and debate doesn’t do it. God does not make himself real through argument. Nor does he respond to our doubts by giving us a series of doctrines for us to take on board. He deals with us by giving us a person. And God continues to give us people whose lives and deaths are transparent of his own life and love, making Jesus tangible and real for us here and now.

It’s all about the reality of a life lived in a Christlike way. In the very early Church, local congregations would write to one another describing the sufferings they’d been through and sharing the stories of those they knew who had died for their faith. It was the witness of the first martyrs that so impressed their contemporaries. As an early Christian writer put it: “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church”. Not all of us are called to be martyrs, of course, but all of us are certainly called to witness to the power of God to transform and renew us, by the way we live and, if it comes to that, by the way we die.

So the Saints help to make God believable. But they can also teach us something about what it means to be a member of the Church. In the passage from the letter to the Hebrews we read earlier, the writer lists a number of heroes for us to emulate, and then continues – “without us they will not be made perfect”. That’s an extraordinary thing to say, when you think about it. What he is suggesting is that without us, St Francis of Assisi will not be made perfect, without us, St Cuthbert, or St Wulfstan, or Mother Theresa will not be made perfect. In other words, these great witnesses will only complete the life God has intended for them when we respond, when we enter into relationship with them, when the way in which they have made God believable, comes alive in us. Which shows us that the Saints of the past belong to the same Church as we do, and reminds us just how profoundly we are bound up with one another across time and space. We belong together in the grace of God, and the holiest of God’s children only enter into their wholeness in communion with us. It’s worth remembering that in the dark times when faith is dim, and trust is weak. You don’t just live in your own faith and trust; you live supported and strengthened by the faith and trust of the Saints.

Time, of course, is of little significance in the kingdom of heaven. At All Saints tide we celebrate, and are sustained by, our fellowship with the Saints of the past and with those of our own time. But we can also celebrate our fellowship with the Saints of the future. If it is indeed true that the great saints of God are not made perfect without us, then in the future there will be an awful lot of people on whose faith and holiness we are going to depend. One day soon we will be the generation that has passed. One day soon people are going to look back to us, and it would be nice to think that they would look back with gratitude, and feel that in our time we had helped make God believable, so that they would be glad to help us through the gate of heaven by their response, their faith and their thanksgiving. Today we can look forward to the Saints we have not yet met and the Saints who have not yet been born, for our holiness and salvation and welfare are bound up with theirs. We can ask what witness we want to leave to them as we ask ourselves what is required of us if God in Christ is to be truly credible in the lives of his people.

So have you met a Saint? Of course you have. Think of the people throughout your life who have comforted and supported and upheld you. Those who have inspired you, and enabled you to glimpse what Christianity meant in practice. Think of those who have gone the extra mile on your behalf. Those you have seen patiently living out a selfless way of life on behalf of others. Those you have witnessed dying bravely and well. In my experience, it's often the quiet people who unexpectedly reveal what Christian living means in practice. Those it is easy to overlook. One of the greatest joys of being a parish priest is that you are given the opportunity to see the grace of God at work in the lives of those you come to know well, and if I had to say what is the single most important thing that sustains my faith today, it would be the example and inspiration of countless people I have known in the parishes where I served. God works by his grace to transform our human natures, and I have been privileged to witness that miraculous process in many lives.

If you have not already done so, I would urge you to compile your own list of saints, those who have helped and supported and encouraged you on your personal journey. It's good to remember such people and give thanks for them, for they are the ones God has used to make himself real to you, and used to deepen your response to his love. And what is true for you and me personally is also true for the Church as a whole. By the grace of God, our Communion, the Church of England, continues to produce Saints. People are bearing witness to the love of God today by their living and their dying in every town and village in our country, and indeed throughout the world. At a time when the future seems more than usually uncertain and chaotic, it doesn't hurt simply to give thanks for that.

Let me end with some words of Michael Mayne: "At All Saints tide we don't celebrate some remote heavenly House of Lords. We celebrate people like us. And if we are especially celebrating those who have opened themselves most fully to the Spirit of Christ, that is simply because they illuminate the words 'human being'. They show us our potential as men and women made in God's likeness. We affirm them because they affirm us. They point us to our true destiny and they rekindle our hope".