

Ever heard of John Mason Neale? I know about him, because for a short time he was Vicar of Crawley in Sussex, where I served in the 1980s. He was a follower of the Tractarian movement in the Church of England that began with people like John Keble and John Henry Newman who wanted to remind people that the Church wasn't just a human institution, but a divine fellowship. Neale was very much a man of his own time, a thorn in the side of his diocesan bishop, but nevertheless a devoted pastor who founded the Order of St Margaret, a community of nuns who served the needs of the poorest in his area. But his main claim to fame is as a translator and writer of hymns. "All glory, laud and honour", "O come, O come Emmanuel" and "Of the Father's heart begotten", are his, for example. He died in 1866.

Or what about Mary Sumner? She was a Vicar's wife, and originally came from Colwall, just the other side of the Malverns. In many ways she was a typical woman of her period, raising her three children, and helping her husband in his ministry by playing the organ in church and taking Bible classes. What makes her special is that she realized how hard it was for the women of her time to bring up their children. Her vision, which was a radical one for someone of her background, was to encourage women of all social classes to support one another and see motherhood as a profession as important as those of men, if not more so. By 1892 there were 60,000 members of the Mother's Union and by the turn of the century 160,000.

What John Mason Neale and Mary Sumner have in common is that they are both included in the Church of England's Calendar of Saints. In fact we'll be celebrating them on Tuesday, and Thursday of this week. We tend to imagine that the Saints come from the distant past and only exist in stained glass windows. Not true. Our church continually updates the list of people of faith that we should remember and celebrate. Last week we recalled William Wilberforce, and next week we'll be giving thanks for Florence Nightingale, Octavia Hill and Maximilian Kolbe.

These are not people from the distant past. They all lived relatively recently, and the way they lived challenges our understanding of what discipleship and holiness involves. They're a varied lot. John Mason Neale was not someone you would choose to have a pint with in your local pub. Frankly, he was probably rather odd. And Mary Sumner was a very ordinary Vicar's wife, who was extraordinary at the

same time. These are real people with real personalities, who in their own times faced real challenges and opportunities, just as we do in ours. They were not without weaknesses and faults but what makes them special is that in them we recognize God's grace remarkably at work, so that their lives were both transformed and were transformative. And of course that is how God wants to work with each one of us. We are all called to be Saints. So please be very conscious of the fact that you have God-given gifts of character and personality that are yours and yours alone. Not only that, but no-one is living in the particular circumstances that you are, in your home, your workplace, your relationships, and your environment generally. God is within you, and with you, moment by moment, day by day, longing to transform your nature by his grace, to enable you to live creatively and fruitfully within your particular circumstances, so that his kingdom may go forward. Being open to God's grace in our lives is the vocation we all share, a vocation that the Saints remind us of, and encourage us to undertake with greater enthusiasm and commitment.

People like this are important because they remind us what the Church is. It's very easy today to think of the Church as a very human organization that is fallible and declining. People like John Mason Neale, Mary Sumner and many others, remind us that what we see is not the whole picture. We belong to a Community that spans time and space, and includes all those who have gone before us, not least those who have left a valuable legacy of faithfulness and holiness. In the words of the hymn, the Church is a "blest communion", a "divine fellowship", and while "we feebly struggle, they in glory shine" – and this is the point - "all are one in thee, for all are thine". The Church is a Spirit-filled Community, all of us together, not just those of us here on earth today, but also those who have gone before, bound up together with us in the Body of Christ.

So when we worship, as we do here this-morning, we really do need to have at the forefront of our minds and hearts, a vivid sense that we are entering into the eternal worship of the heavenly host – "with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven". That is what is really going on as we take part in what can sometimes feel to be our rather half-hearted and dim efforts at prayer and praise.

Here, for example is Bishop Westcott, in the 19th Century – himself someone that we now remember in our Calendar - writing about the Communion of Saints:

“If the outward were the measure of the Church of Christ, we might well despair. But side by side with us are countless multitudes whom we know not. We have come to the kingdom of God peopled with armies of angles and men working for us and with us because they are working for God. And though we cannot grasp the fullness of the truth, and free ourselves from the fetters of sense, yet we can, in the light of the Incarnation, feel the fact of this unseen fellowship, we can feel that heaven has been re-opened to us by Christ. “

And Robert Atwell continues along much the same lines: “The saints offer each generation exciting and contrasting models of how to follow Christ. They constitute very individual stars in a wide galaxy, and their sheer variety and vitality affirms the worthwhileness of the Christian endeavour. They teach us something profound about God’s call to holiness, about being a Christian in the world today, about being a human being. Thomas Merton once wrote: “Unlike the animals and the trees it is not enough for us to be what our nature intends. For us holiness is more than humanity. If we are never anything but men and women, we will not be saints and we will not be able to offer to God the worship of our imitation which is sanctity. For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self.”

Tomorrow is the Feast of the Transfiguration. On the mountain Peter James and John, saw Jesus as he truly was, revealed in glory. Our calling – yours and mine – is so to open ourselves to the grace of God, that our natures may be transformed and renewed so that we may become the people that we were made by God to be. And we do this together, thankful for one another’s friendship, partnership and encouragement along the way, and of course, in gratitude for the fellowship and example of all those who have gone before us, one with us in Christ.