

Year A All Saints Gospel Matt 5.1-12a HTK The Rev'd Robert Holland

Yesterday afternoon I laid in supplies adequate for what I thought would be a number of bands of marauding Halloweeners who would present themselves at the front door of the Vicarage with their time-honoured call of "trick or treat".

I chose somewhat carefully, the best apples, equally delicious bananas and some grapes but to my abject delight very few turned up. I guess it must have been the prospect of advancing through the car park to the darkly, gloomy bluestone Vicarage which put many of them off. If not the thoughts of their own parents on the prospect of Covid 19 lurking somewhere in the semi darkness.

Over the years I have sought for some explanation as to why families and children roam the streets on this Eve of All Saints Day with weird costumes in order to gain a few sweets. But then there are other celebrations that are marked during the year with a similar sort of aspect to them. Where did April Fools Day come from and why is it that people spend the hours approaching midnight on New Year's Eve behaving in ways unlike any other night.

Perhaps part of the explanation may come from a celebration that used to take place in the medieval era in parts of Europe but now has largely disappeared. It was a holiday known as the Feast of Fools. On that colourful occasion usually celebrated about January 1 even ordinary pious priests and serious townsfolk donned bawdy masks, sang outrageous ditties and generally kept the whole world awake with revelry and satire. No custom or convention was immune to ridicule and even the highest personages of the realm could expect to be lampooned. The Feast of Fools was never popular

with the higher ups who constantly condemned and criticised. It survived until the 16th century, then in the age of Reform and Counter Reformation it gradually died out. Perhaps Halloween and New Year's Eve and even April Fools day all have a faint resemblance of what the Feast of Fools was saying.

Harvey Cox an American theologian from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century has this to say in his book titled Feast of Fools:

*The feast of fools had demonstrated that a culture could periodically make sport of its most sacred royal and religious practices. It could imagine at least once in a while, a wholly different kind of world - one where the last was first, accepted values were inverted, fools became kings, and choir boys were prelates. The demise of the feast signalled a significant change in the Western cultural mood: an enfeeblement of our civilization's capacity for festivity and fantasy.*

We substituted sobriety, thrift, industry and ambition for mirth festivity and fantasy. For festivity and fantasy are not only worthwhile in themselves, they are absolutely vital to human life. Only humanity celebrates. Festivity is a human form of play through which we appropriate an extended area of life, including the past into our own experience.

So today we celebrate All Saints Day and the rest of the world yawns, or at least remembers, if only because yesterday was Halloween. I suspect many of us today look at the traditional "Saints" as either inaccessible or otherworldly and beyond mere mortal comprehension. A saint is someone whose image is stamped on a medallion or carved into statutory or else died a gruesome death for his or her faith in Jesus Christ or commemorated in the stained-glass windows that surround me now. Every time we recite

the apostles Creed in worship we profess to believe in the Communion of Saints and on All Saints Day we sing all the appropriate hymns. Yes, we may be struggling, or we may be faltering, but we are part of that Community of Saints along with the Apostles, Augustine, Perpetua, Felicity, Jerome, Hildegard, Oscar Romero, Mother Teresa, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mary McKillop and a host of other folk.

At the same time there is always a risk of becoming sentimental about the Saints. Honour them, be influenced by them, and treasure their memory by all means but do not discount the cost of being a Saint. The values which Jesus affirms in today's gospel, the Sermon on the Mount, are "out of this world" Maybe like a preview of eternal life? That limitless life we are called to start living here and now. Living will undoubtedly get us into trouble. The old world is set in its ways. It might be like wearing the cloak of respectability, pay lip service to Jesus as an honourable man but if people begin to emulate him, something other than sweet roses hits the fan!

After all those beatitudes -as pretty and harmless as they may sound when read with an ecclesiastical lilt - would turn things upside down if they were lived. It takes a brave and adventurous spirit perhaps a saint, to set out to walk the walk as well as talk the talk.

Think about it!

*Blessed are the poor; blessed are the sorrowful; blessed are the meek; blessed are the merciful; bless are the pure in heart; blessed are the peacemakers?*

Try that on in our greedy, hedonistic self-assertive, vengeful conniving and violent world and see how far you get without some troubles coming your way!

The Saints are people who were divinely adventurous. They attempt to live Jesus style as far as possible in this crazy old world. Rarely are they popular in their day, usually such folk were loved by few and either ignored or mocked by many.

Saint Mary McKillop in 19<sup>th</sup> century Australia was not popular among the power brokers. Her work with the socially disadvantaged was not welcomed by those in power, and that included those with ecclesiastical clout. She was even excommunicated for a whole year

Little has changed today. There are countless ordinary "small saints" around us who said yes to the spirit and word of the beatitudes. Loving, adventurous souls who in one way or another have suffered hurt, rejection or sophisticated disdain, because of their loyalty in following our Lord Jesus. Rarely to such folk get into the news

On this All Saints day let us take stock. Let us affirm our commitment to the poor preacher, the "Son of Man who had nowhere to lay his head" And be happy about it.

Let me stress that: For God's sake be happy about the hard choices you have to make. To follow Christ is to combine some frustration with much happy adventure. To follow Christ mixes discipline with new liberty and some pain with much happiness.

Our religion is just as much a perversion as what's characterised as success religion. The Saints great and small are happy souls. The way of Christ is certainly not for wimps but neither is it for those with sour faces and leaden steps. Better still, be Fools for Christ!