

The Wymersley Benefice of Cogenhoe and Great Houghton
and Little Houghton with Brafield on the Green

Sermon 31 October 2021, All Saints

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Today we remember all the saints who followed Jesus, many of whom were martyred in showing their love for God- and the depth of their faith.

The truth is that each and every one of us has the potential to be a saint if we are willing to acknowledge Christ as the Messiah, the Son of the living God and live our lives according to his will.

We do that partly by praying, reading our bible and doing good to others – as Jesus and the early disciples did, but above all that, we must live in a power that comes from God, on whom we depend. It is that attitude of dependant faith which makes disciples shine with the goodness, care and compassion that gets them marked out as saints by others.

Our reading today from the book of Wisdom, is quite often used in the funeral service as it speaks about death and the suffering of the good. No matter how great our sufferings are, they cannot be compared with the peace that we are promised after death as we enter fully into the kingdom of God.

This knowledge continues to gave courage to all in the past who suffered for their faith in remaining faithful to the way of Christ, and it is that same knowledge that gives strength to all persecuted people in all parts of the world today. We hope and pray we will never be called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice to die for Christ, although we can't know precisely what happens after death, we know what happens before it and we trust in God to continue to be God. So, as we remember the people who have died for their love of God, we remember also that God will still be taking care of them.

Our Gospel story shows us Mary and Martha, who are distraught with grief after the death of their brother Lazarus, the fact that Jesus didn't get to them in time to heal Lazarus made the situation worse, only arriving on the scene when Lazarus had been buried in the tomb for four days. Jewish mysticism teaches that the spirit of a deceased person remains around the body for up to three days after death and on the fourth day it departs to Sheol or Hades, so for Lazarus to be in his tomb for four days, there was no doubt he was dead! While Jesus showed his humanity by shedding tears at the death of his friend, Mary complained that Jesus hadn't been there to save Lazarus and Martha didn't want to get too close to her brother's tomb because of the smell – neither believed that Jesus had the power to bring Lazarus back to life – I'm sure we would have been no different, so we can't condemn them for their reactions, even though they were hardly the way we might think a saint should behave. Yet Jesus didn't just grieve with the sisters, he saw their tears and talked about the hope of the resurrection and the promise of being with God in his Kingdom forever. Then, as if to give a sign of that promise, and to show the immense power of God to all those gathered around the tomb, he called Lazarus to come out of – and he did!

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We too share this hope of eternal life and in knowing there is more to life than birth and death, with the struggle to live and exist in the days between. This is not just a passive hope we have through faith, it is a hope given flesh and blood by all those people we read about in the scriptures whose testimonies point to Jesus and the grace of God. Many of these people gave their lives for Christ.

So, what is a Saint?

We know from the reaction of Martha and Mary it's not someone who gets everything right, who is always successful and never makes mistakes. Rather a saint is someone who trusts in God's promises, even when times are hard, who is confident in God's ability to be God, and let him guide them to be the best they can be. The Greek word for saints used in the New Testament literally means holy ones. To be holy is to be set apart for God in complete trust that Christ will complete his work in us, even when we get things wrong. It is about letting go of hunger for health, wealth, family and security, to surrender such things into the hands of God, and to hunger instead for the kingdom of justice and peace that Christ will ultimately bring.

On this All Saints day as we remember the great and the good, let us also remember that we too are called to be saints by God who loves us and forgives us and challenges us to take up our cross and follow him into a quality of life and love that our harsh world cannot give. We cannot live exactly as Jesus did, for we are not God, but we can aspire to live as Christ like a life as possible. Being holy is something that we are, by the very nature of our relationship with God, we are part of the body of Christ. It is he who has called us and sanctified us, and it is he who makes us holy; he calls us to live in communion with him and in communion with all the other saints around us, those who have gone before us and those who will come after us.

Amen.