

Wales Synod, 02 March 2019

I want to talk about saints. 'Ah yes,' you say, 'David. We've just marked his saint's day. We remember him, as a Christian teacher and thinker, a leader of others, a nurturer of relationship and a shaper of community.' All of that can be saintly; it is good that we honour such people and seek to walk in their steps.

Beware: walking in David's steps could be unsettling. It is said that on one occasion when he was preaching, nature as it were offered an endorsement of the preacher and his message: the ground rose up beneath him to make a little hill, so that people at the back could see and hear better. But perhaps we should not be too keen to emulate this aspect of his ministry. One Welsh historian has said that one can scarcely 'conceive of any miracle more superfluous' in this land than the creation of an extra hill (John Davies, *A History of Wales*, Penguin, revised and updated edition, 2007).

However, David is not the only one. As they sometimes say in the media, other practitioners of sanctity are available. And that's the point. Other practitioners of sanctity are available. The word 'saints' is common in the New Testament for Christians, members of the church. There are other words too – sisters and brothers, believers, disciples, friends, congregation, people of the way. But saints is a very common term, used about sixty times, and almost always plural.

Saints are not individuals apart, distinguished in some way from run-of-the-mill Christians, and given a special status – days of their own, stained glass, haloes, perhaps a seat on the platform in heaven. Saints are you and me, the ordinary Christians, the normal ones, the sort you worship with, the kind that you are linked with in local church life, the people who with you offer a witness to the world. No more, no less, no different, no more confident, no better.

The idea that Christians are saints comes many times in the New Testament. One place that states this very directly is the opening address of the letter we call 1 Corinthians: 'Paul ... To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints' (1:2).

Several things to say about being saints:

It comes from outside us

It's a gift. Saintliness is borrowed property. For a Christian to be holy, saintly, is like saying that the moon is bright. The light is real, but it comes from somewhere else, and the moon only possesses it and only passes it on because there is a line of sight from the moon to the sun. When something blocks that line of sight – the earth – the moon goes into eclipse and ceases to be bright for a while. There is an obvious analogy to our Christian living: is there a line of sight from us to Jesus?

Saintliness is not exactly natural

It's not part of the created order of things. God is holy. Then saintliness comes when God reaches out to share that holiness with people or places. Yet the h-word – holy – is a peculiar God word.

Although the Bible uses many illustrations from nature or human life to speak of God – light, love, shepherd, shelter, rock, ruler, rescuer, joy, judge, stormy weather, fresh water – to call God holy is not to deal in any of those illustrations. It is to say that there is a realm of reality in God that cannot be enclosed in the world or in words – a reality that is deeper, truer, wiser, more gracious, great, grand and good than the life of earth. God is apart, separate, different, distinct.

To speak of the church as a saintly people is to think of that reality touching our life and flavouring our living. That's not entirely natural; it doesn't happen as readily as breathing. It's more like making a new friendship and finding that someone from right outside you has stirred and changed you on the inside. And even that illustration breaks down because our friends are rooted in our world, and holiness is about our world being touched from another realm of reality, one that we do not and cannot control or command.

Saintliness is personal

In the Old Testament people are called holy, and so are things. Places and equipment that you use for worship have a holiness about them, and you need to handle them with the greatest care, as you would electrical equipment today. Then in the New Testament that changes: the notion that people can be holy comes into much greater prominence. Things are not thought of as holy to the same extent as in the OT. You look for holiness: you find it primarily in the people who gather in the name of Jesus. So, for example, in the Old Testament there is much about the temple as a holy place. Yet in the New Testament, in the letter from which we read, the church is described as God's temple (1 Cor 3:16). A gathering of Christians is a dwelling place for God.

Saintliness is Trinitarian

Where better to speak of this than in Llandrindod – the church of the Trinity? For it is God our maker, the first person of the Trinity, who calls us saints and calls us to be saints. It is Jesus our Saviour whose cross and risen life are the lever, the door, the path to a life of holiness. Again in 1 Corinthians we read of 'Christ crucified,' (1:23), and then the letter goes on to say that he became for us holiness from God (1:30): holiness comes by the cross, because of the cross. Then the third mover in the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, is the one who applies, animates, activates and articulates the holiness of God in your life and mine. Holiness is a relationship, not a commodity. It's a narrative, a story worked out in days and events and individuals. It's the story of your life and mine as a chapter in the history of God.

Saintliness is plural

It's about community and communion. The word 'saints' comes up dozens of times in the NT. The singular 'saint' hardly ever. Sanctity, holiness, is communal. It's part of who we are to be together. It's an aspect of what the church is as family, as fellowship, a company of friends, a corporate witness in the world. Your holiness is never going to grow as full and as sure as it might without the Christians around you. The other side of that coin is that their reflection of the life and light of God comes in part from their bond and belonging to you. We are not in this alone. The Holy Spirit touches us from the left and the right, from the Christians beside us, not just directly from above.

Which leads on to the notion of a bigger fellowship, the communion of saints. The whole church across the ages and around the world is in this together. Our tradition might have something to gain from others, and vice versa. The church of today draws deep on the life of God because others have handed it down to us. Christians of the future will be enriched by our faithfulness. All are part of the communion, the common belonging around the cross and empty tomb. We are not in this alone, and not meant to resource ourselves in isolation.

Saintliness is practical

'Be holy, for I am holy,' says the Old Testament law (Lev 19:1). Then the text goes on to say what holiness might mean. 'Love your neighbour as yourself' – the awkward person whose habits, opinions and aspirations trespass on yours. Holiness involves providing for the poor when you harvest your fields – the ancient equivalent of buying for the foodbank. It entails integrity with property and with speech, in the workplace and business and the lawcourt. It means knowing how to restrain our temper and our tongue. It's about handling ourselves, our relationships and our behaviour with honesty, wisdom and respect; about living as community and in community; about noticing family and foreigner, and recognising God's claim on us in both.

Saintliness makes a difference

Holy people, who live by God's gift and call, are people you can trust. They tend their place and the community around them. Saints are for the world. Let your light so shine that others may glorify God. When we pray, 'hallowed be thy name,' we are acknowledging that true hallowing, real holiness, has its roots in God. Yet we also go on to say, 'on earth as it is in heaven,' and as we do we commit ourselves afresh to live our days with an eye and a heart for God. We pray that the life of earth would reflect the holiness of heaven.

Saintliness may not, as reported of David, change the contours of the land. But it will change the character of the life that is lived on God's earth.