

All Saints/All Souls
Sermon preached by The Revd John Stewart at
St George's Malvern
2 November 2014

I begin our reflection time today with an invitation. An invitation to come on a journey of your imagination. From where you are sitting I hope you can see at least one candle burning. Focus your attention on the flame at the top. It's a living flame. Imagine the flame representing you, your life and your faith. Then think back. Who was the person who lit this flame of faith in you? Maybe a parent, a grandparent, a teacher, a priest? Maybe there have been more than one over the years – those who have encouraged you in your faith – have enabled your flame to keep burning. Say a quiet prayer of thanks to God for that person, or those people.

And then imagine them standing around us while we are here this morning. Their names might be written on the wall near you. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews says "we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses". They have witnessed by passing on their flame to us. It's a bit like passing the flame from one person to another on the way to the Commonwealth or Olympic Games. These are some of the saints we remember with thanks today.

Then as you imagine the name of your saint written on the wall near you, notice nearby there is a coloured window. This church has a most inspired sequence of these windows. As you sit where you do, up and down the nave walls and across the two front transepts – the windows tell the story of the passing of the flame of faith from Nazareth to Britain, through the centuries to Australia, the Pacific and Papua New Guinea. These are more of the saints we remember with thanks today.

All the Vicars of the parish over 140 years are listed there – members of the parish who were killed time of war are listed over there – benefactors of the parish and some key leaders are also mentioned on plaques. And all those whose ashes are interred in the memorial garden just beyond that wall. These are even more of the saints we remember with thanks today.

For today is the day we set aside each year to remember

All Saints – those whose response to Christ's call was especially noteworthy;

All Souls – all the departed not singled out for special commemoration and particularly those who have been important in our lives;

And for all God's "holy people" living today.

Saints is the term to describe all three types of people. The writer of Ephesians 1.11-23 gives thanks for the saints living in his time and prays that God will give them wisdom and hope and the power of the Holy Spirit.

From the earliest days Christians have honoured those who lived Christ-like lives. By the beginning of the 5th century there were more martyrs than days of the year so they instituted this All Martyrs Feast and observed it on the Friday after Easter Day. Then in 835 it was transferred to 1st November and called All Saints Day. 150 years later they began the practice

of memorial days for Christians who had died but who were not martyrs or people distinguished by faith or death. These were not occasions of thanksgiving for great lives, but prayers that God would give to the departed a share in the victory of the risen Christ. This practice spread and was promoted especially in the monasteries. It became known as All Souls Day – the day following All Saints Day. By the 17th century the Reformers had a different view and All Souls day was not included in the Book of Common Prayer – there was great argument – and still is in some places – about praying for the dead.

We affirm that the heart of this festival is the fact that God raised Jesus to life through death and calls us to follow the same way. We are all called to life by way of death. Those who have died now live in Christ – we thank God for that. Our whole life is a deeper immersion into Christ and our physical death changes nothing. We go on in this relationship.

When someone dies we give thanks for God's gift of life and we commend the person to their ongoing life in Christ beyond this life. It is a time for us to look forward as well as back, and calls us to live in the light of what is to come.

At next Sunday's workshop we will be looking at some of the very practical implications of all of this. The seminar we are calling "In the event of my death". Perhaps you can think of it like this: when we are preparing to go on a trip we have a lot of things to prepare: bookings for travel and accommodation, passport, money and so on. For our final and most important trip – there are also a lot of things to prepare for. Next week we'll be looking at them.

We are the saints of God living now and we are in communion with the saints of God who have gone before us. And while we are alive we have human guides and burning lights to accompany us. And we also have the teaching of scripture as our guide.

In today's Gospel reading from Matthew we have Jesus' radical and challenging teaching on how we are to live. What attitudes and dispositions we are to develop. The words are very familiar to us: blessed are the poor in spirit, and so on. For a change, here is the translation of this text by Alexander Shaia. The discussion groups on Wednesday and Thursday this past week considered how these words challenge us to:

- Accept that we do not and will not know results in advance – we often feel "poor in spirit".
- Make farewells to our yesterdays and embrace the grief we feel.
- Be humble in our willingness to journey.
- Know that our true hunger and thirst are for Spirit and only for Spirit, despite all trials and temptations.
- Greet all we encounter, within and without, in mercy, and reap the rewards of gratitude.
- Be full of heart welcoming each person, thought and feeling for each is an aspect of Spirit.
- Believe in Jeru-Shalom as a home of welcome and respect for differing voices.
- Accept inner and outer hardship as needed for the sake of living a new life in the presence of God.
- Anticipate lack of esteem, being prepared instead for tension and conflict – and meet it with respect and love.

As you increasingly live like this, you will spark off the flame of faith in others. And they will thank God for you on All Saints Day in the future.