

OUR LADY STAR OF THE SEA, WEYMOUTH
HOMILY FOR THE FEAST OF ALL SAINTS
1ST NOVEMBER 2009

At this time of year, as the hours of daylight shorten and the people around us celebrate Hallow E'en, we live through a dramatic reminder of what life is all about – the struggle between darkness and light, life and death, fear and love, pagan and Christian.

That's why we celebrate the Feast of All Saints at this time of year. But what are saints and how do they help?

The first reading from the Apocalypse seems to suggest that saints are martyrs, "those who have been through the great persecution", a reference to one of the fierce persecutions of Christians by Roman emperors. It seems that saints have to die violent deaths in defence of their faith.

This seems a bit restrictive. We can think of many holy people who died naturally. Surely saints are people who live in the love of God like God's children.

St. John in our second reading is saying to his Christian community: "we are already the children of God". If saints are God's children then he is saying that they are saints already.

St. Paul, too, in his letters, addresses Christians as saints.

So saint was a simply faithful baptised person.

This takes our idea of sainthood from one extreme to the other, from those who have died violent deaths in defence of their faith to all faithful Christians living as well as dead.

The Church now regulates those whom it recognises as saints by the process of canonisation.

A saint is only officially a saint if the Vatican agrees that the person has lived a heroic life on earth and is praying for us in heaven, for which the evidence of a miracle is required.

Again this can seem very restrictive. John Henry Newman, one of the holiest of Englishmen, has had to wait years for canonisation because there was no evidence that he had worked a miracle for anyone. Now evidence has been recognised and he is due to be officially declared a saint next year.

That still leaves many other holy men and women who ought to be saints.

The Church allows us to acknowledge them in this great feast of All Saints.

It also allows us to think that, as St. John and St. Paul suggest, any Christian can be a saint.

But what do we have to do to be saint? Our gospel gives us the answer. We have to do nothing.

In the gospel Jesus gives us a checklist, the Beatitudes.

There are no rules to be kept, no targets to be met.

Instead he gives us a list of qualities to develop – poverty of spirit, gentleness, willingness to mourn, a hunger for justice, mercy, peacemaking, faithfulness, courage and perseverance.

Sainthood is about being, not doing, so it is better to ask, what must I **be** to be a saint?

The answer is to develop these qualities. Then we will be as pure as Christ, real saints

Real saints?

This seems impossible, but look carefully at St. John is saying in the second reading.

We do not have to achieve all these to perfection.

He says we must **try** to be as pure as Christ.

A saint is one who tries to be as pure as Christ and never gives up, even when he/she is persecuted and abused.

And how do saints help us?

Saints help us by their prayers in heaven and by their example on earth.

Jesus says that anyone who tries to live the Beatitudes faithfully in spite of all difficulties will be happy, blessed, and fortunate.

Saints are happy, eternally happy in their faith.

It is always helpful and encouraging to meet positive, eternally happy people.

Let us thank God for all those who encourage us and pray that we may be saints for others by encouraging them.

Rev Geoff Carey