

For All the Saints

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 7 November 2010, by David Gill. It was a celebration of the eucharist for the Sunday of All Saints.

A few days ago, on 1st November, our western churches marked the festival of All Saints.

For many people, especially those shaped by the traditions of Protestantism, All Saints seems little more than a quaint medievalism, recalling those dim distant days when people believed not only in saints but also in sea monsters, witches and the flatness of the earth.

That is our loss. Because All Saints Day has a place of enduring importance in the Church's calendar. It has a lot to say to us, especially to us in the Uniting Church in Australia, at this point in our history. For it reminds us that on the way of Christ – as a denomination, as congregations, as individuals – we never walk alone.

All Saints invites us to celebrate our companions on the way. Some are great figures, whose names we know, who through the centuries and across the nations have been powerful symbols of faith and faithfulness. But there are the others, even more important, whom no one can number, whose names we can never know, who have gone before us and who march with us yet on the road to the cross. A vast and incredibly varied mixture of people, through whom we have received the faith and in whose companionship we are guided, corrected, supported and inspired for faith's journey.

To them we are profoundly indebted. Never forget it. Recognizing that indebtedness puts your life and mine, your confusions and mine, your failures and mine, into true perspective. It also puts into perspective the present preoccupations of our church, with its successes and failures, its follies and fears. Lose this perspective and you end up taking yourself and your own time far too seriously, because you're not taking the past seriously enough.

A sense of history is not one of the Uniting Church's strong points. We tend to act as though the Church began only yesterday – and rather late yesterday at that! We also treat "conservative" as a negative word, forgetting that cherishing what we have received and conserving "the faith once delivered to the saints" is a legitimate and necessary part of the Church's calling.

So value the past. But do not romanticize it. When it comes to the saints, don't get carried away by the Vatican ceremonial, the haloes, the statues, the stained glass windows. Remember that in giving thanks for the saints, we're expressing gratitude for people who were, and are, just like us. Earthen vessels. Very human. Wonderfully human. Appallingly human!

Take John Calvin. Children of the Reformation would want to claim him as one of the saints. But don't forget that he tolerated the execution by burning of the Spanish dissident, Miguel Servetus.

All saints? Scratch any one of them and you'll find an ordinary mortal, warts and all. Devout people, with blind spots as well as insights, compromises as well as courage. Among them, Christians who somehow

tolerated slavery – and found what they thought was biblical justification for so doing; who marginalized women – and could quote chapter and verse for this being the will of God; who fostered racism and anti-Semitism – again, claiming scriptural support; who in a thousand and one ways denied the very faith they were professing – and, amazingly, didn't see the contradiction in what they were doing.

This too is part of our history. No wonder the Church's most frequent prayer is "Lord, have mercy". Through two thousand years we've given the Lord quite a lot to have mercy upon!

But try not to be too harsh in judging our forbears in the faith. The historian Manning Clark, in his autobiography *The Quest for Grace*, argues that "A historian or a teller of a story must look on all human beings with the eye of pity". Certainly in telling the Church's story we must look on our forbears with the eye of pity, as we must hope for the same pity from those who in time will judge us.

For do not forget that, one day, posterity will be shaking its head similarly over us, the Christians of the early 21st century. What, I wonder, will our unrecognized blind spots turn out to have been?

Yes, the saints, all of them, are oh-so-human. But even with their follies and foibles, they remain God's great gift to us. And God's great gift of encouragement for us.

Years ago, as a young ecumenical bureaucrat in Geneva, I had a friend doing a similar job with the Vatican Curia in Rome. Over a beer one day he told me that things were not going well. The church politics and personal power plays were really getting to him. I sympathized. If things are that bad, I suggested, why not get out? You don't have to stay in Rome. Come to that, you don't have to remain a priest. "David, you don't understand," he said with a smile. "She may be a whore, but she's my mother" – which, if you think about it, is really a very sound doctrine of the Church!

She's our mother too – bringing us to life in Christ, nurturing us in this world, embracing us yet in the world to come.

All Saints reminds us that we're never alone on the way to the cross.

It reminds us, further, that you and I do not carry the Church of God on our poor frail shoulders. We are ourselves borne on the shoulders of others, that vast communion of believers past present and to come. A wonderfully rich and varied family of faith

- that prays for us when we can no longer pray for ourselves;
- that believes for us when our own faith falters;
- that supports us in times of weakness;
- that enlightens us in hours of darkness;
- that embraces us in moments of despair;
- that endures, even before the gates of hell.

For all the saints; for all those, seen and unseen, who accompany us at this table of the Lord; for the rich heritage which is ours in Christ – thanks be to God!