

5 November 2023
All Saints Sunday

Revelation 7:9-17
1 John 3:1-3
Matthew 5:1-12

The great east window of All Saints Church on the Square appropriately depicts a host of saints, a veritable “hall of fame” of Christianity down the centuries.¹ There they are, picked out in radiant colour, with haloes around their heads, accompanied by traditional symbols that help us identify who each one is, all suffused with the light of the sun beaming in from outside. They make an awesome sight.

St John’s vision in Revelation 7 too is an awesome sight.

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. There were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.

But who are these ones wearing white robes?

The answer comes: “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

John’s vision is of the faithful who have died in the persecutions that were about to come upon the early church. There is, then, a beautiful assurance in this vision that the brutal reality of persecution is not the final reality. These martyrs will be sheltered in God’s presence, enjoying already some of the blessedness that is still to come in full when all the faithful dead will be raised on the day when the Creator judges the world at last.²

The development of a celebration, a feast day, of All Saints came about in part out of the development of a tradition of giving particular honour to exceptional examples of the Christian way, especially those who died for the faith, the martyrs – such of those of St John’s vision. Over time the honour gradually expanded to include not just all

¹ I owe the “hall of fame” image to Jacobsen.

² Wright, *Revelation*, 73-76; Wright, *Resurrection*, 471; Wright, *For All the Saints*, 24ff.

martyrs but all saints. It was not until the ninth or tenth century that November 1 came to be widely celebrated as the feast of All Saints.³ (It is simply for convenience that we have this year translated our celebration of the day to the following Sunday, today).

The All Saints east window was commissioned in 1920 and installed in 1924 as a memorial to those who served with the allies in the First World War. Depicted in the stained glass alongside the saints – those who have gone through the struggle of persecution for their Christian faith – are figures representing the allies who struggled in that twentieth century war, fighting and dying for our freedom.⁴

We can well understand the motivation for this design at the time; but as with many things of history the passage of time – in this case a century – may lead to new evaluations. We appreciate that the motivations in war are not always honourable, and we know that not every act done is appropriate and just. That is perhaps a topic for another day.

Regardless of our views of the rights and wrongs of service and sacrifice in war, we might in any case wonder at the elevation of these representatives of war-time allies to be depicted in the window alongside those held to be saints. How do we feel about *anyone else* being included alongside genuine saints, our “hall of fame” of Christianity?

And it is here that we discover the real problem. Our problem is if we do think of this window, or the calendar of the saints, as being like a “hall of fame”.⁵

If we think of the “NZ Music Hall of Fame”, or the “NZ Rugby Hall of Fame” or the “NZ Sport Hall of Fame”, we know that induction into a hall of fame is used to honour those who have excelled in a particular field, reaching the pinnacle of success.

Jesus does not evaluate things in the same way. In Matthew 5 Jesus pronounces certain people “blessed”. This is honorific language. It can be translated as “How

³ Booth, pp. 764-765

⁴ Wigglesworth, p.31

⁵ Jacobsen

honourable”, “How full of honour”, “How honour bringing” etc. And in Matthew 5 we find that contrary to dominant social values in Jesus’ time and still now, Jesus ascribes honour to those unable to advance their own cause, push themselves forward, defend their position; those who refuse to take advantage of or trespass on the position of another.⁶

Rather than a hall of fame, I prefer to think of the saints rather more like those honoured in the New Year’s and King’s Birthday honours lists – especially the MNZMs and QSMs for service to the community. On the days these lists come out, I occasionally find myself joking with friends about the dreadful injustice that they have missed out yet again.

The thing is, as worthy as the people honoured might be, we all can think of many others, equally deserving, who are not honoured.

So why have these honours?

If for nothing else, those honoured for community service are singled out to remind us all of the kind of people we are called to be. It seems to me that this is true of the saints too: they are singled out to remind us that the call to remain faithful to Christ, no matter what, is the call of us all; singled out to remind us that their being sheltered by the presence of God in their death awaiting the resurrection is the future we share too.

As I’ve said before, the word “saint” belongs first of all to every one of the faithful – the word “saint” belongs to you and me. It is one of the words St Paul regularly uses to refer to the church: *hagion*, “holy ones”.⁷ And our saintly work extends to every dimension and sphere of life. In his centennial history of All Saints Church, Roger Wigglesworth give his first chapter the heading “For All The Saints” and begins as follows:

What is a church? It is the united whole body of countless laity and the clergy who work together for the extension of Christ’s kingdom on earth.

When one comes to survey the work of a church, especially in its centennial

⁶ Bruce J Malina and Richard L Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Fortress, 1992, p 47; cited in Vena. Vena quotes Malina and Rohrbaugh directly: I have adapted the quote somewhat.

⁷ See Jacobsen; and Wright, *For All the Saints?*, 21-22

year, it is very easy to confine one's comments to the church as the building and all that goes on within its walls. In fact this is an invalid view for religion, as the great English statesman Stanley Baldwin once said, "is not merely an affair of Christians in Churches; it is an affair of Christians in politics, in diplomacy, in trade, in industry, in school, in sport."⁸

The risk with the "hall of fame" thinking, the risk of getting unbalanced in our celebrating those honoured as "saints", is that we don't feel valued. But you and I are of incalculable value to God:

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!⁹

God loves us! God loves us, not because of what we've done, nor because of what we may do. God doesn't love us because we've lost our life for the faith or some other cause; God doesn't love us because we've attained hall of fame status; God doesn't love us because the world has chosen to honour us in some way. God doesn't love us because of our talents or character or capacity or charisma. This fact puts all our evaluations of ourselves and of others, all our strivings, successes, failures, disappointments, and highlights into proper perspective.¹⁰ God loves us: end of story.

But along with that assurance we might feel a bit challenged in this, because 1 John goes on to say:

All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. ... No one who lives in him keeps on sinning.¹¹

John knows, of course, that Christians do still sin from time to time. What he is challenging here is the whole habit of life, sinning as the regular mode in which we

⁸ Wigglesworth, p.1

⁹ 1 John 3:1

¹⁰ Lose

¹¹ 1 John 3:3-4, 6

live. What the Christian is growing into is instead a settled habit of life in which sin is no longer setting the tone.¹²

The Greek words “pure” and “purify” have the same root as “holy”. Flowing out of the love of God and the work of Christ on the cross, we day by day grow more truly “saintly”.

All Saints Church has been closed for several years now. Five months ago I had the rare opportunity to, very briefly, go inside. And the sun was streaming in through that magnificent east window. I was not however there to view the window; I was allowed in so that I could borrow the pool in which we baptised Anne Morley. At her baptism Anne became a saint with us. As I said on that occasion:

Baptism is the public, physical and visible way in which someone is marked out with the holy ‘name’. As Jesus was given, by the angel, the name ‘Jesus’, signifying his real identity as Saviour and the task that lay before him¹³, so now, with his work complete, we suddenly discover that the ‘name’ which we are all to share is the new ‘name’ of the living God – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In baptism we are incorporated into the family of God and into the family business. It is baptism that we become included in the saints. But it is not a graduation. It is the beginning of a lifelong growth in holiness, saintliness.

As saints, and *with* all the saints, we don’t seek honour for ourselves. And here the martyrs depicted in St John’s vision show us the way. It is not as if they are standing around in bright array, saying “look at me!”. No, they are crying out in a loud voice:

“Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”¹⁴

The martyrs direct our gaze to the only one truly worthy of all honour.

Here the great east window in All Saints Church points the way too: in the middle of the window is the figure of Christ himself, and the window’s tracery forms a cross.

We Christians, with all the saints, are *martyrs* in the original sense of “witnesses”; we are all to bear witness to Christ: pointing to who he is and what he has done for us;

¹² Wright, *Letters*, 151

¹³ Matthew 1:21

¹⁴ Revelation 7:10

pointing to his self-giving love expressed in his adoption of us, of all who would accept it, that we might be children of God.

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