

The Church's prayer for Sunday 31st October

God, the source of all holiness and giver of all good things:
may we who have shared at this table
as strangers and pilgrims here on earth
be welcomed with all your saints
to the heavenly feast on the day of your kingdom;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Bible Readings and Reflection for Sunday 31st October

A reading from Revelation 21:1-6a

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

⁵ He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

⁶ He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End."

A Gospel reading from John 11:32-44

³² When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴ "Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

³⁵ Jesus wept.

³⁶ Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

³⁷ But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

³⁸ Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹ "Take away the stone," he said.

"But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days."

⁴⁰ Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?”

⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.”

⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

A reflection from Revd Paul Garnell, Team Curate

“For all the saints, who from their labours rest, singing to Jesus, in their Sunday best!” As we would sing at my primary school, St Michael in the Omelette (Hamlet). And another, “Joshua fit the battle of (Jericho) Cherry Coke!” We would work hard at altering the lyrics to as many hymns as we could - simply to torment our music teachers and local priest. Perhaps some of you have similar stories to tell?

All Saints’ Day is a Principal Festival, one of the nine great annual celebrations alongside Christmas Day, Easter Day, and Pentecost that the Church holds very special. I expect churches dedicated to 'All Saints' will be making a big deal of it but not down the road at Haslingfield, because instead, you should all be here at St Helen, Little Eversden! No brownie points to the Core Team member that missed that one, including me!

Did you know that the Oxford Dictionary of Saints lists over 1,000 of them – and that's by no means all of them, we might come up with barely a tenth of these if we put all our heads together. There are an awful lot of them, despite having been thinned down and regulated around the 12th or 13th century when it became only the Pope who could officially declare someone a Saint. For more than a thousand years before that, Saints were identified locally when someone came to attention as being exceptional. Exceptionally what? Exceptionally odd if you look at some of the accounts, especially as re-told in modern versions on the internet. Google 'strangest saints' and you get some bizarre stories. You could have hours of entertainment identifying the winners for the Guinness Book of Records type categories: the oddest Saint, the naughtiest Saint, the ugliest, the quietest, the most tortured ... yes, we could get into the Horrible Histories of Saints really easily. That's because they were, by and large, an odd, but saintly lot! They mainly started out no odder than us lot: which is only slightly odd, but something in every case happened to them that made them particularly aware of God and led them – enabled them – to do exceptional things because of their faith. The ability to pursue what they knew God to be calling them to do made them extraordinary. That ability came from God, they were filled with what we call his grace; we can all experience God's grace at times but what marked out people as saints was that they were abundantly grace-filled people. That was the aspect that caused people around them to hold them in awe and wonder, to see the holiness in, or despite, the way they lived. It was the sort of holiness that shone out of them, that made their faces radiant and gets painted as halos on their heads in portraits.

A bit of history: The veneration of Saints started in the 2nd century with the tombs of martyrs as special places because people believed those who had gone to a violent death rather than deny their faith in Jesus were surely in heaven and would hear their prayers and help them. Then the Lives of Saints began to be written for edification: to instruct and encourage people by the example of their lives. Bede was a pioneer of this in the late seventh Century. By the sixteenth century the whole notion that Saints could ensure a route to heaven became big commercial business for the Church with a huge trade in relics - that is, bits of bone and other fragments supposedly of Saints – and with payment for prayers and Mass's. This was a compelling reason for Martin Luther to criticise the Church, that then contributed to the reform, the creation of the Protestant Church, and subsequent dismantling of shrines and the destruction of any images and statues of Saints – of the Roman Catholic Church - by Henry VIII. You can walk round many a parish church and cathedral today and see first-hand the empty recesses where saintly figures would have once been, or the faces of stone saints smashed – noses knocked off and eyes scratched out.

Memories of these events may, perhaps, still cause uneasiness in the Anglican Church if we get over-enthusiastic about Saints and their proper place in worship. As the Anglican Church we would say, clearly, that we believe Jesus is the one who hears our prayers, and we pray to and through him. That said, we would never want to under-estimate the value of the Saints as routes to God: by what they teach us about how to find God, how to worship and serve God, and speak to and about God. In the same bracket as Saints, we would include those leading figures of the Anglican Church that are not officially Saints (because the Anglican Church doesn't canonise Saints, that's still left to the Pope) but are recognised by being given special commemoration days on which to thank God for them and acknowledge their contributions. In the Book of Common Prayer and some of the Common Worship Eucharistic prayers, the priest says, 'in the company of [N and] all the saints, may praise and glorify you forever, through Jesus Christ our Lord;' So, we acknowledge that we are in the company of the saints, living (I believe), in heaven, as we are in earth. The bracketed section allows for local custom and the priest to include either Our Lady, the name of the patron of the church, so St Helen in this case, continuing with 'and all the saints,'.

Today is All Saints Day, and it's the day to thank God for All Saints' and acknowledge their contribution to our Church life and also to our personal lives. I wonder how many of us have been inspired by the stories or writings of Saints? My confirmation saint is St Francis, and the group I was a member of at Theological College was named St Jude – the patron saint of lost causes – those facing difficult and impossible situations. Well, by the very fact I am stood here today clearly indicates that he wasn't sleeping on the job!

There is another primary reason why we celebrate and remember the Saints this Sunday, and it's reflected in the readings chosen for the day. The themes of being given new life: like Lazarus, raised from the dead as Jesus' demonstration that he was bringing the gift of resurrection to all who believe in him. Lazarus was only given new human-length life: he died in due course, as will we all, temporarily – and he is / was, a demonstration of how, one

day, Jesus promises to raise all believers to a new eternal life. Something similar to the sort of resurrection he, Jesus, experienced which will likewise occur for us.

Another glimpse of it is described in the vision John writes about in Revelation of a new heaven and a new earth – 'Death will be no more ... See, I am making all things new.'

The Saints are a key part of this. They and all those who have died in the faith are part of the growing band of faithful that have died but are not finished. They are accompanying us as we work through our lives. They are part of what are referred to as 'all the company of heaven', 'the cloud of witnesses'. Because their lives were lived in a way that was extreme, because their vision and knowledge of God was so all-consuming, in the fullness of their believing, they help us see the glory of God. That can really change our lives, make us new people, transform us by drawing us deep into the mystery of Christ and making us aware of how differently we want to live our lives when we live them for Him.

St Ignatius is a great example of someone whose life was changed by reading the Lives of Saints. He completely abandoned his affluent lifestyle of drinking and womanising to choose one of poverty, prayer, and learning. Wanting to describe the steps he had taken to find God, and thereby guide others to finding God. He subsequently wrote one of the most important and influential religious works – the Spiritual Exercises – which are still very much in use today. Saints demonstrate that ordinary people – and sinners at that - can become extraordinarily grace-filled and through that, become new people. They live on in the words we use in worship, in famous prayers and writings, through the legacy of their actions. They have shaped our Church and our world, and will continue to do so, that is why we celebrate and thank God for them today.

'From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast,
through gates of pearl streams in the countless host,
singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Alleluia, alleluia'.

Amen