

Year A, All Saints' Day  
Revelation of John 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10, 22  
1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12  
St. Catherine's Episcopal Church

Seventy-three years ago, on All Saints's Day, a requiem eucharist was celebrated for the Archbishop of Canterbury. William Temple was one of the giants of Anglican Christianity in the twentieth century. During the thirty-five years between his ordination as deacon and his death at Lambeth Palace, Temple was a parish priest, headmaster of a boys' school, and convener of conferences on the role of Christian faith in public and political life. He laid the groundwork for what we now know as the World Council of Churches, served in the House of Lords, and held the two highest positions in the Church of England. Somewhere in between all of these activities, Temple also managed to write an average of a book for every year of his ordained ministry.

Does it somehow seem ironic that a Christian powerhouse such as William Temple was laid to his final rest on the one day of the Church year that we set aside to honor the lives and ministry of very ordinary baptized people? Even thinking about it makes it hard for me to sing, with a straight face, that well-known hymn: "The saints of God are just folk like me, and I mean to be one too."

Most of us don't aspire to the sort of prominence or prestige that accompanied Archbishop Temple, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Mother Theresa throughout most of their lives. But our desire to serve God and Church in smaller, quieter ways doesn't mean we have nothing in common with the superstars of the Christian faith. If our gospel today tells us anything, it tells us that serving and loving God in even the smallest way makes us saints, too.

We've heard these words from Matthew's gospel so many times that it can be easy to ignore them. A priest by the name of John Dear writes of a moment when Jesus' words from the Beatitudes became a reality for him. "In the summer of 1982, a few months before I entered the Jesuit order, I visited the Holy Land to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. On the day I left the United States, Israel invaded Lebanon. When I stepped off the plane in Jerusalem, soldiers carrying machine guns searched me. I had unwittingly walked into a full-scale war....

"I visited the "Chapel of the Beatitudes," a small, eight-sided stone church that stands on a hill overlooking the sea. I remember sitting there one afternoon, carefully reading the familiar words inscribed on the chapel walls: Blessed are the poor. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed

are the pure in heart. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those persecuted for the sake of justice, for Jesus. Love your enemies. Be as compassionate as God.

“I walked onto the balcony and surveyed the magnificent Sea of Galilee. It suddenly dawned on me: I think Jesus is serious. I turned to the sky and called out to God, ‘Are you trying to tell me something? Do you want me to hunger and thirst for justice? Do you want me to be a peacemaker? Do you want me to love even my enemies?’

“‘All right,’ I declared, ‘I’ll work for peace and justice for the rest of my life — but on one condition: if you give me a sign!’ Immediately, two Israeli jets swooped down at me from the sky above the Sea of Galilee. They roared over me, causing a sonic boom. Moments later, they dropped bombs along the Lebanese border. Trembling, I made two decisions in that moment. I would devote the rest of my life to working for peace and justice. And I would never ask God for another sign. “

It can be easy to think that these familiar words from Matthew’s Gospel don’t apply to us. Compared to many people in the world we are not poor; those around us might not describe us as “meek;” and we may even find ourselves examining and questioning the purity of our own motives. But, in some ways, even our greatest Christian role models did not have these qualities. Archbishop Temple was born into a privileged family, Dr. King and Mother Teresa were certainly not meek in speaking up for those who could not speak for themselves. What is it in these twentieth-century saints that we can see in ourselves?

Jesus tells us in today’s gospel: righteousness, mercy, peacemaking. Exercising these virtues does not require that we dedicate our lives to the Church. It does require courage, because showing mercy, or doing what is right, is not always popular. The history of the Christian faith is a history of people who love mercy, justice and peace so much they have been willing to die for those things, and they are still dying for these things today. It has been the history of people who have given shelter to the poor, worked to free slaves, treated women as equal to men-- in short, people who have believed that God created everyone and everything and are willing to treat all of their sisters and brothers as members of God’s beloved family.

It is the history of great saints, to be sure. It is also the history of nameless saints—those who routinely give of their time to feed the hungry or visit the sick, those who write letters to our local papers or elected representatives when they see injustice in our social and political systems. They are the people who work to produce goods and services that sustain our lives and try to do so in a way that respects the earth as God’s precious creation. They are the people who take time to mentor a child at Double Diamond Elementary or to mourn with the bereaved. They are the nameless people who work for what is right, and good and fair for all people, rather than just for

themselves or the people most like them. The saints of God are among us and touch our lives every day.

At Trinity Parish, there's a bank of stained glass windows that runs down both sides of the nave; these windows depict a variety of great Christians throughout the centuries. There are martyrs, bishops, priests and nuns, and also artists, poets and politicians. A priest who used to serve there told me the story of a young boy whose mother was explaining the windows to him, saying that the people pictured were saints. The little boy turned to her and said, "Oh, I get it. Saints are people that the sun shines through."

Saints are people who live in the love of God, people who let the light of God's Son shine through them. It doesn't matter if we are an Archbishop in England, a civil rights leader in the United States, or an elderly nun in India--or the men and women who meet us here at the door each week. Or the woman who works for fair treatment of children in the court system, or the man who works to make certain no one goes to bed hungry in our community. All of us share a common vision of righteousness, mercy, and peace. The saints of God are among us. The saints of God are us.

God loves us. God has a purpose for each and every one of us. We are each participants in bringing about the reign of heaven here on earth. No part is too small. They are all big because they are the parts that God has chosen specially for us and for no one else. The great saints have understood this. Archbishop Temple wrote that "the whole harmony of creation depends upon the offering by each humblest spirit of its own appropriate note of music which no other can sound without discord." We each have our part to sing. No one else--great or small--can sing it for us. It doesn't matter how well we sing. It is the chorus that we make singing together that fills God's heart with joy. Come, let us join in the song of our fellow saints. "they were all of them saints of God, and I mean, God helping, to be one, too." Amen.