

Sermon, Harpham Church, North Yorkshire, for the Feast of St. John of Beverley
9th May 2019
Isaiah 61: 4-9 and John 17: 18-23
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Thank you for the invitation to join you for this wonderful occasion this evening. It is a privilege to share this special feast with you.

Some words from tonight's reading from the Gospel of John:

'As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.'

What makes a saint?

On Tuesday this week someone died who was proclaimed a living saint. Jean Vanier, who died aged 90, was a Naval Officer whose life was transformed when he encountered some people with intellectual disabilities. He took two people in, lived with them and cared for them, finding that he was given far more in blessings than he ever gave. He became the founder of L'Arche communities for adults with learning disabilities. He wrote:

'Genuine healing happens here, not in miraculous cures, but through mutual respect, care, and love. Paradoxically, vulnerability becomes a source of strength and wholeness, a place of reconciliation and communion with others.'

Now there are over 140 L'Arche communities throughout the world. I first came across the works of Jean Vanier when I was a curate. My incumbent had, has, a son called Ben, who can neither move nor talk, but who was a key member of our church congregation each week. The inclusive, compassionate philosophy, or theology, of Jean Vanier, was an inspiration to us.

But when people referred to him as a saint, Jean Vanier didn't like it, because it implied that he was doing something that no other ordinary human being could do.

And that wasn't true. He once said: "I had no plan, I just met people and people with disabilities awoke my heart."

Regarding another possible saint, Pope Francis has recently authorised the Congregation for the Causes of Saints to issue a decree attributing a miracle to the intercession of the Blessed Cardinal John Henry Newman – the Oxford scholar and priest who converted to Catholicism and wrote so many wonderful works. The move clears the final hurdle in the cause for his canonisation.

But whether living or dead, stories about great deeds, miracles and wonders are often at the heart of hagiography. Stories about the Anglo-Saxon bishop St John of Beverley, whom we celebrate this evening, were certainly provided by Bede. His birth here at Harpham and his Holy Well, his life of prayer and humility at Whitby, Hexham and as Archbishop of York, his love of the poor and the needy, his enthusiasm for educating the young, and his monastic retirement at Beverley, as well as miracles of healing, and, as William of Malmesbury related, the miracle of taming savage bulls just by bringing them into the churchyard at Beverley, where John is buried. A letter of Edward I, of 1301, relates that Athelstan overcame a Scots rebellion because he prayed to St John of Beverley. Carrying a banner with St. John's image on it before an army allegedly became a common guarantee of military success.

But the fourteenth-century spiritual writer and author of *Revelations of Divine Love*, Julian of Norwich, whose feast we celebrated yesterday, had a different take on John's sainthood. She wrote:

'In this vision my understanding was lifted up into Heaven ... and St John of Beverley, our Lord showed him in glory as a comfort to us because of his familiarity, and brought to my mind how he is a kindly neighbour and known to us. And God called him 'St John of Beverley' simply, as we do, and did so with a very glad, sweet expression, showing that he is a very high saint in heaven in his sight, and a blissful one. And with this he made mention that in his youth and in his tender age he was a beloved servant of God, greatly loving and fearing God, and nevertheless God

permitted him to fall, keeping him mercifully so that he did not perish nor was ever lost. And afterwards God raised him to manifold times more grace, and by the contrition and meekness which he had in his life, God has given him in heaven manifold joys surpassing those he should have had if he had not fallen. And that this is true, God shows on earth with plenteous miracles being done around his body constantly. And all this was to make us glad and merry in love.'

The fact that St John was flawed, fallen, was an important part of his relationship with God, why he lived a life of humble service, kindness and prayer, and why God blessed him with spiritual power and he gained such a following.

As the Julian scholar, Emma Pennington, writes:

'Each sin brings with it a grievous pain so, in heaven, there comes a reward ... He [John], like other saints, was renowned as a great sinner who repented. He was a dear worthy servant of God because he was [in the Middle English] "full mekille God loving and dreding" and it is in this attitude "by contrition and mekenesse that he had in his living' that God gave him the joys of heaven.'"

Such a sentiment echoes the words from the prophecy of Isaiah that we heard read this evening:

Because their shame was double,
and dishonour was proclaimed as their lot,
therefore they shall possess a double portion;
everlasting joy shall be theirs. (Isaiah 61:7)

It was precisely because John was a flawed man, who was not perfect, that he was aware of his need for God's love, which is why he spent so much time in prayer and had such love for ordinary flawed people. There is a story that every year John would go to a quiet spot on the river Tyne in Northumberland to pray with some of his followers. The poor and needy came to him and he took care of them, rather like Jean Vanier and the simple acts of kindness that started the L'Arche movement.

The image of St. John of Beverley on a banner may have brought an army victory, but the real battle that John fought was with sin. His sainthood, his sanctity, was given to him by God not because he was perfect but because he was a penitent sinner.

Our Gospel tonight shows us what makes a saint. Not our deeds, or our reputation, or what institutions or traditions we establish, but Christ sanctifies us himself, by his sacrifice for us and by his self-giving love. Jesus prays to his father:

As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

Jean Vanier, John Henry Newman, Mary Magdalen, John of Beverley ... you ... me.

What makes them, us, saints? What is it that sanctifies us? Makes us holy? It is the grace of God that, through faith, is freely available and given to any who ask for it, for any who in humility and contrition kneel before the heavenly throne of grace and ask for forgiveness. Who are, by the power of God, given contrition, compassion and longing for God that allows us to offer, like Jean Vanier, John of Beverley, help to those in need and to receive more in return than we could ever imagine possible. Christ sanctified John and he sanctifies you, that in the words of Jesus, you too might be sent out into the world and show God's love to your neighbour.