

All Saints' Day 30 October 2016 – Magdalen College

When my uncle died he left a collection of colourfully illustrated adventure books: Scott of the Antarctic, David Livingstone, Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* and various tales of intrepid valour for boys. They were published around 1910 and depicted a world of derring do and almost magical heroism.

Many of us think of the saints like that: St Peter crucified upside down, Joan of Arc burnt in the market place at Rouen, Sebastian shot with arrows under Diocletian, surviving, recovering, and sometime later being clubbed to death, or Polycarp tied up and killed by the sword at the age of 86 before being burnt. But the significance of saints has to be more subtle than a series of ripping yarns.

Stories are where we pour our stuff. What do I mean by that? We explain our lives by telling stories: when we gossip we are partly testing opinion, when we rant about Brexit at the bus stop we're trying to shape the political future, and when we pour out our problems to a friend or counsellor it's a way of making ourselves feel better. In the great literary stories, which include of course the stories from the New Testament, as well as Shakespeare's plays and tales of Zeus, Eros and Hephaestus - or Red Riding Hood, come to that - we find elucidations of big themes such as justice, betrayal, war, self-giving love, and man's inhumanity to man. In the case of saints, it seems to me, we have stories about goodness, faith, loyalty, testing, and resilient Christian discipleship.

In the modern world, I'd justify the keeping of All Saints' along those lines. In centuries gone by the emphasis was different, less nuanced, and more about praying to those who had gone to heaven, asking for help with all kinds of mundane tasks from fishing or bee keeping to bartending. St Bartholomew the Apostle is said to have been skinned alive and, rather distastefully in my view, became the patron saint of tanners and leather workers. Dating back to the second century, the big function of dead saints, buried under the high altars of churches and cathedrals was to provide a source of healing in a world where medicine was a bit hit and miss. Touching the relic of a saint, or kissing the reliquary in which the finger or eyebrows of a holy one was preserved, offered a possible cure for all manner of illnesses. And many people *were* healed. You could call it a kind of faith-healing or auto-suggestion or maybe it was the result of inaccurate diagnosis, but miracles seemed to occur.

It wasn't only cures that were sought. A pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in Spain could cut in half your time in purgatory (purgatory was a place of suffering where souls were cleansed ready for heaven) and if you visited Santiago in a holy year you could cut out purgatory altogether. (Here in Oxford, Trinity College has a lock of the Blessed John Newman's hair, cut by his mother from his infant head, although I am pretty certain it's not used for healing purposes.)

When it came to making saints, how were church officials to know whether a candidate's motivation for martyrdom was genuine or that they were truly holy? The basic proof was the authentication of miracles achieved in their name. In the Catholic Church this still applies. Personally, I think it's mad. Invariably, it seems to me, the search for a miracle to back up a claim for sanctity cheapens what should be a more serious and edifying process. And a sceptical public finds it laughable, knowing pretty well how medicine works. A classic example of a modern day miracle would go something like this. A priest says, 'I had a bit of a gammy leg, so I prayed to so-and-so, and amazingly a few days later it got better.' I can't see the point of it.

This week I picked up Alan Bennett's new book *Keeping On Keeping On* and, opening it at random, the first thing I read was Bennett describing his doctor, John Horder, as 'kind and in some respects saintly'. Horder was the one who famously said, while examining Bennett for bowel cancer, 'No I can't find anything that concerns me here, but it's always nice to see you.'

So to be kind and in some respects saintly gives us a clue that in the popular mind saints have to do with goodness, as in *saints and sinners*. But it's a mistake to think that saints must have been perfect. Mother Teresa is criticised for not using up to date medical equipment and allowing less than clean conditions in her clinic. St Augustine of Hippo, when he was young, lived with his mistress and had an illegitimate son by her. Just as artists don't have to be morally good to articulate a moral truth (Mozart had a crude sense of humour; Tolstoy was cruel to his wife) so saints can inspire goodness without being perfect. And maybe their imperfections make them all the more convincing. Of course, the Protestant Church doesn't really go in for saints. After the reformation the cult of saints was considered to be part of the Catholic Church's superstitious practice and its corrupt theology of salvation - time off purgatory and all that. Yet many of the inspirational Christians who spring to *my* mind as saintly are protestant and therefore not saints in the technical

sense – William Wilberforce - slavery, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King. Today's sermon is known as the 'Jellicoe' sermon, an alumnus of this college. He lived in the early part of the twentieth century and devoted himself to housing the poor, founding the St Pancras Housing Association (originally the St Pancras House Improvement Society) and several other housing associations in London, Sussex and Cornwall. He toured the country in his small car fundraising and selling loan stock to fund these projects. In another age he might have been a saint.

Colleges are always proud of the achievements of old members and list them in the annual magazine. You know the sort of thing. So and so has become a professor, another has made 25 million in a hedge fund, and just occasionally John has been made a saint – usually after he's been dead for a century or two. Which trumps which in our contemporary scale of values I'm not entirely clear. But of one thing I'm sure, we need saints in an age of selfishness. Their stories remind us of cherished standards of what is true, honest and just. These days, when so many of the old religious certainties are rightly questioned and many people claim to have no religion, there are nevertheless many who say they want to live by Christian a Christian moral compass and for their children to grow up knowing about those values. Because the great genius of Christianity is Jesus' emphasis on care for the outcast, loving your neighbour as yourself, and the sovereignty of self-sacrificial love. These virtues we see exemplified in lives like Francis of Assisi or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who died rather than submit to Nazi political doctrine. It's good to have moral heroes; it's good to want to live like those we admire; and to tune into that sense of moral value that shouts out to us as universal: human rights, care for the environment, peace rather than war. That is the essential and perhaps most generative part of our religious faith experience. It's an idea taken up by one of the really grand views of Christianity – the communion of saints. The idea that there is a meaning which transcends birth and death and links human experience across the boundaries of our limited lives. Hence we pray that most beautiful prayer at All Saints' tide:

O ALMIGHTY God, who hast knit together thine elect in one communion and fellowship, in the mystical body of thy Son Christ our Lord: Grant us grace so to follow thy blessed Saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those unspeakable joys, which thou hast prepared for them that unfeignedly love thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.