

November 5 2017, All Saints Anglican Church

Combined service of All Saints Catholic and Anglican Churches, Kempsey 5.11.17

Called to be Saints? (Matthew 5:1-12)

A few weeks ago, my car was stolen and our house broken into. Others in our neighbourhood also suffered break-ins around that time. Sometimes we tend to think that as Christians, who at baptism were signed with the sign of the cross, marked as Christ's own, children of God, and "called to be saints" or called to be holy, as St Paul describes the Christians in Rome and Corinth, we should be surrounded by an invisible divine holy barrier protecting us from any type of suffering. But this did not happen for Jesus and nor does it happen for us who are his disciples or followers.

We Christians live in God's world like everyone else. Today's reading points out that in our lives, just like others, we shall experience, pain, weakness, anxiety, failure, grief, depression, along with joy, pleasure, success, and peace. It is the way we live through such events and emotions that we can fulfil our call to be saints.

Our church buildings here in Kempsey dedicated to All Saints, remind us that it is as members of the Body of Christ, the Church, we are made holy or saints in Christ Jesus. Holiness is shown to us in the life of Jesus. He knew what it was like to be tired, misunderstood, persecuted, and finally executed on the side of a road outside Jerusalem. His life was one of loving God and neighbour shown in the relationships he had with friends and strangers he met each day, and also with the whole of God's creation.

When we are trying to follow Jesus, embodying Christ as individuals or a church congregation, we can find ourselves wrestling with temptation, helping others but sometimes resenting it, sometimes succeeding in caring for others, but also failing and needing to ask for forgiveness, being depressed but always, or at least usually, believing in God's loving presence that never leaves us. It is how we respond each day to the challenges we meet, that enables us to fulfil our vocation as followers of Jesus and reveals something of God's love where we are. It is when travelling along our road through life that we are being formed as saints, holy ones of God, although we shall probably be unaware of it.

In our reading from Matthew, Jesus describes various people and how they might be seen from God's perspective as called to be saints. Let us

consider several of them briefly, relating them to ourselves and our relationships with one another in Christ.

There are times when we may be 'poor in spirit', an unfamiliar phrase not used in daily conversations today, but describing a lack of life, energy, enthusiasm. We feel depressed, a failure, and listless. We may try to keep up a bright public face, but then it all becomes too much. We lower our barriers and open ourselves to receive acts of love from others, the life of God that we need.

When I heard about my car being stolen, I felt emptied. I imagined it torched and just wanted to burst into tears. I was at a Diocesan Lay Ministers' Workshop at South Grafton. As soon as the people around me knew what had happened they immediately supported me. Later, after I had returned home with a friend, I found that some young men I didn't know were asked by a neighbour to go and look for my car. They discovered it in the bush, took me to it and then drove it back to our house. These people known and unknown, in their caring actions made present God's healing love, and the reign of God was glimpsed and experienced in our relationships.

Jesus also experienced a healing act shortly before he was captured and killed. When eating at the house of Simon the Leper in Bethany, an unknown woman anointed Jesus with costly ointment. Jesus gratefully received this loving action and was strengthened for what was to come. (Matthew 26:12). The healer was healed with ointment, a gift of earth. It reminds us of life in the Kingdom of God, being a healing place for all through loving relationships between people and creation as a whole.

Another verse from our reading talks of mourning and grief. We all know what it is to experience the loss of loved ones, friendships, jobs, good health and possessions. There is also grief shared with others who are suffering loss, members of our family and refugees fleeing terrible situations in our world. As Australians we may grieve over the suffering our country is causing to Indigenous people and refugees in our detention centres. On our television screens we often see people grieving in war situations or natural disasters of tornadoes or bushfires. After such events, people are shown comforting each other, and even risking their lives to save those unknown to them. Again the love of God is revealed in relationships that form saints.

Jesus also mourned, not only at the death of Lazarus, but earlier when the news of Herod's killing of John the Baptist reached him. Jesus immediately left with his disciples by boat for a solitary place to grieve. But people needing healing and feeding saw where he was going and followed him by land. Jesus temporarily put aside his own need to help them (Matthew 14:13-14). Eventually, that evening, he was alone and was comforted. I suggest that his action of unexpected ministry also offered some healing for him.

To be passionate for righteousness or justice, in a position to be merciful towards another, or to bring peace to a conflict are usually possibilities for those with some status or power. Normally only people free from the daily demands of needing food, clothing and shelter can focus on striving for righteousness and justice, or offering mercy and peace.

We may work for justice, but what is it? Injustices are not healed by obtaining an eye for an eye, or a tooth for a tooth? Such an outcome only spreads more suffering. It is revenge and does not restore what is lost or damaged, nor does it bring peace and true reconciliation. God's justice seems to involve a costly act of forgiveness or mercy.

To be in a position to forgive can give power over another or a group of others. With such power, we can be tempted to withhold our forgiveness to make others feel some of the pain we have suffered. In the Lord's Prayer we say, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us". Is one truly dependent on the other? Whether we are forgiving or being forgiven, we need to try to understand the perspective of the other. This may help us to put aside any feeling of power and instead painfully offer forgiveness from the depths of God's love, and also receive forgiveness from another who offers it to us.

The beginning of a loving relationship which brings peace and freedom to those forgiven, also begins the work of holiness in all involved. Through forgiveness God's reign of love is revealed in the world. We might ask, is the Church able to accept forgiveness for the harm it has caused others, and are those who have been harmed able to offer it? These are hard questions, but need to be faced.

Jesus asked God to forgive the soldiers who nailed him to the cross, and the risen Jesus forgave Peter for his denial in the garden. It is not easy but it is freeing when friends and strangers can be forgiven for the deliberate or unknown pain and suffering they have caused.

When people work towards forgiveness, peace can emerge in them and between them. When we destroy or cast out from a group those who hurt us, we destroy something of ourselves, and prevent the possibility of a life-giving relationship to develop.

Finally in our reading, we come to the experience of persecution. When we are persecuted for our faith, for serving God and our neighbour, we are probably following most closely in the steps of Jesus who was often criticised and condemned for what he said and particularly for what he did. But Jesus and we are not called to be victims but saints. Our weakness and vulnerability in our world only makes sense when we bring it into relationship with the life of Jesus. He was not the flavour of the month for everyone he met and he often failed in his teaching and actions to enable even his close followers to understand what he said and did. When his disciples deserted him and he was killed, his whole life and work seemed a failure. Yet Jesus in his life and death revealed God's love and holiness on earth. He affirmed for us that God is with us in the most distressing and lonely situations we can experience, and in the end there is healing and the resurrection into eternal life in God.

We who follow Jesus, are called to embody Christ, be saints of God, to value above all else loving and caring attitudes towards others. Even to treating animals and plants gently and respectfully. These are the things that are eternal and remain for ever. As the fox in the story "The Little Prince" told the prince, "what is essential is invisible to the eye". The marks of the saints are not tattooed on their skins but are invisible, especially to themselves. But they are known in relationships that offer to others encouragement in depression, forgiveness and acceptance after shameful deeds, being noticed when missing, fed when hungry, healed when sick, and listened to when angry, lonely or feeling that no one cares.

On this day we particularly give thanks for, and are encouraged by all those faithful ordinary people who witnessed day by day to God's love in the past in this place of Kempsey, and continue to witness today. We, as followers of Jesus, empowered by the Spirit, are reminded by them to respond to our own call to be saints, as individuals and members of the

church, loving God and others, and revealing something of the reign of God in our world.

Sister Helen CSC.

(“The Little Prince” *by Antoine de Saint-Exupery*)