



## Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

# For all the saints

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All Saints' Day is an important day in the Christian calendar; often ignored by many, as it does not comfortably fit into the way people think about their discipleship. Sadly folks are more likely to know more about what people call 'Halloween'. With the celebration of All Saints, the church takes a backward glance to recall with deep gratitude those who have gone before us in the faith.

As we look back, we also look forward to the vision given to us in the last book of the Bible. In Revelation 21, there is a description of the New Jerusalem. The picture is not a geographical phenomenon, but the vision of a bride ready for her husband.

When exploring this theme, there are many passages of scripture we could refer to and I have chosen the first verse of Hebrews 12.

In Australia, we love our sport in all its different codes. There was no greater moment for us than to know, in the year when the world would celebrate a new millennium, that Australia would host the Olympic Games. Christian students could not miss the fact that the sports contests of old, such as the stadia for sports, provided a setting for some the content of the epistles.

I wonder if this was in the mind of the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews when he described "*a great cloud of witnesses*".

Hebrews 11 is one of the most interesting chapters in the Bible, for we are given insight from all our forebears in the faith. It is an account of what faith is all about and set in action through the lives of such a wide range of people over hundreds of years.

- I wish I could take you to Westminster Abbey – Poets' Corner
- the practitioner's corner of faith
- it is an exhortation to all of us to a life of faith

The chapter is a unit in form, function and theme. You can read it very smoothly from the end of the tenth chapter to the early parts of Chapter 12. It has such an appealing form that some have suggested that it had a separate life of its own before its place in Hebrews. Abraham and Moses clearly have a principal role in Chapter 11, but there are many more mentioned. There is a unique collection of women and men who have demonstrated faith.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles."

The first three verses in Hebrews 12 are a stirring exhortation to look to Christ, but placed into the setting of a stadium where a relay race is taking place. The race is not over and, in a way, the ultimate outcome to some measure is resting upon the subsequent runners.



Such people are like mirrors for us. It was this thought that led the Apostle Paul to write to the Corinthians, *“And we all, who with unveiled faces reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”* (2 Cor. 3:18)

The ones observing are in this great cloud. I want to offer you three thoughts which feel appropriate today on All Saints’ Day. But first some comment about the day itself.

I have always been hesitant about the celebration of individual saint’s days, as they don’t easily fit into the way I think about the Christian life. However, I think differently about All Saints’ Day, which is commemorated on 1 November.

When I was a local minister in a church twenty to thirty years ago, I was frequently asked to preach at the local Anglican Church at their Patronal Festival which, because they were called All Saints’ Anglican Church, was held on this particular day.

Today we remember all those saints and martyrs, known and unknown, past and present, throughout Christian history, who have demonstrated the life of Christ. We rejoice in our calling to be his saints today.

### **The saints are looking on**

Among those who are looking on are those whose lives have been shaped by God’s will:

- those who have made a brave witness for Christ
- those who have ‘run a straight race through God’s good grace’
- those who resisted others who tempted them to give up

The heroes of faith in Old Testament days are described as women and men “of whom the world was not worthy.”

In my Board Room are nine photographs of Superintendents that stretch back to the middle of the nineteenth century – to W G Taylor. They are there when we make difficult decisions and when we meet to consider our direction for the future.

Whilst it is true that no relay race is complete until the anchor leg runs the home stretch, the writer wants us to understand the inter-relatedness of past, present and future.

- as we face the challenges of life – they look on
- as we figure out how to respond to the race – they look on
- as we take hold of the baton – we are inspired

I have told my congregation previously, when in China I visited the tomb of Hudson Taylor of the China Inland Mission. In what is essentially no larger than a house garage in the grounds of what was the local Methodist Church is not only his tombstone, but also photographs of his family who visited at various times. I found this quite touching when I considered that long period of time covered by such people. However, there is a much longer period covered by the crowd that are cheering us on day-by-day, as we seek to press on.

I think of the question: Why would such a crowd be looking on as we take our part? It seems that the Hebrews writer believes that they help to motivate us to run our leg of the race with diligence and perseverance.



## The struggle has not ended

This text calls us to recognise that we are called by God into the life of faith which, due to its strenuousness, resembles the relay race. It is interesting that this passage is often read in Holy Week as we move toward Good Friday. The focus upon Jesus is very clear.

I am led to believe that the French language, of which I have a smattering, makes a clear distinction between those who say they 'go in for sport' and those who actively participate.

Compare:

- those watching the Rugby World Cup – to those playing
- the cost of playing can be far higher than the cost of watching
- but being a committed spectator is demanding and can feel as though you are involved

So, too, in the Christian arena, we count the cost of discipleship, but we know we are surrounded by those who have done so before us. The church traditionally has talked about the 'Church Triumphant' and 'Church Militant'. I am not entirely convinced by such terminology, but it does capture both those who have died in faith and those who are carrying on the race in our time.

There are those who are fascinated by numbers and talk about the number of people in a church or denomination. In reality the 'Communion of Saints' goes back through the centuries:

- I recall preaching on a very cold January evening in Derbyshire in England. From Cliff College, we went out in a group to preach in one of the Methodist Circuits. In the morning I preached in the town church in Buxton; in the afternoon, I was appointed to preach at the small village of Hollingsclough on the border of Shropshire and Derbyshire. The congregation was just three – and that included a visiting organist, who played the old harmonium. I forgot to mention there was a dog. Do you know, to this day that chapel is open, nearly 40 years later! As I preached, I reminded myself of being surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.
- when Terry Waite was taken as a hostage in Beirut, he received great comfort because of the prayers of those who supported him during those difficult times. He received one tiny postcard from Bedford, depicting John Bunyan praying in prison. It reminded him that he was not alone.
- I think of the many who live under persecution because of their faith. One of the inspiring thoughts for them is that they are not alone – and there have been so many who have gone before and borne their witness in the most difficult of circumstances.

At the end of time, we shall have our questions answered that are unresolved at the moment. The Book of Revelation describes the heavenly congregation gathered for worship. You might recall one of the Elders asked about those who were robed in white, "*Those in white robes – who are they, and where did they come from?*" The answer given in scripture is that they have come out of a time of great tribulation (Rev. 7:13-14)

Put simply, these are ordinary sinful men and women who have been made righteous through Jesus Christ, who died for them. God sees us as we are in Christ. The fifth chapter of Matthew opens up the Sermon on the Mount and there we have described for us the attitudes of the family of Jesus Christ (Matthew 5:1-11).



These are the attitudes of the kingdom of God and those who are called as saints are growing up into these attitudes day by day. It begs questions of all of us about whether we are merciful, whether we demonstrate the forgiveness of God and are peacemakers. The disparity between what God calls us to and what we are is often great. Here the Holy Spirit needs room to change us.

### **Faithfulness calls us on**

Some of you will know that I love sport and, throughout my life, I have been particularly engaged with soccer. When I was a Premier League chaplain I would travel to follow my team when my commitments permitted.

Within 30 miles of our home were some of the great teams – Manchester United and Manchester City, Everton and Liverpool. When I travelled to the home of Liverpool FC, it was to their ground at Anfield. Before every match, the massed ranks of thousands of supporters on The Kop would always join together in singing their beloved song from the musical *Carousel* – ‘You’ll Never Walk Alone’.

In a tragic happening at Hillsborough, the home of Sheffield Wednesday, in 1989 ... 96 people were killed in a crush at the Leppings Road end of the ground. Many of them were young people. One of the most moving aspects in the years that followed is the way that the song ‘You’ll Never Walk Alone’ was picked up by young people as an appropriate song to sing to remember those who died.

This may be a popular song, but it has a much wider application for Christian people. God’s faithfulness calls us to an ever-brighter purpose in Christ. This means more than just believing; it is that deep sense of belonging which gives us purpose as God’s people throughout all generations.

One of the clear cultural divides in today’s world is the way we approach funerals. In many parts of the world, there are those who still mourn their dead in ways that would easily be understood in Jesus’ day, with great public expressions of grief.

In much of the developed world, increasingly people want to keep their funerals private and their emotions well hidden. We remind ourselves that in John’s Gospel, Jesus had no such inhibitions when he wept very openly with Mary on hearing the news that Lazarus had died. (John 11:35)

On All Saints’ Day, which has been celebrated across the whole of the Western church tradition for centuries, we remind ourselves especially of those who have given themselves to the cause of Christ, in particular those who have been martyred for the faith – and we are mindful of those who suffer for him today.

The writer to the Hebrews has in mind the great men and women of the Old Testament, who were faithful witnesses to the truth and power of God. But we can rightly extend the thought to the hosts of Christian witnesses that have followed after them. Among them are those whose names are widely recognised, and also all the faithful who have died in Christ.

The word ‘saint’ is a challenge to many people. No doubt we often feel very far from being saints. We are all too conscious of the unholiness of our hearts and yet we are



called to run the race in Jesus Christ. And running the race means becoming what we are – and that is what the Apostle Paul meant when he said we were “called to be saints”.

We have to become ‘saints’ through our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the very work of the Holy Spirit and the only way this is possible, as our text reminds us, is by “looking to Jesus”.

I have always enjoyed sport and when I moved to the Grammar School it was not only cricket and football, it was athletics. I was selected for cross country running, but everybody tried the athletics events.

At that particular time, Dick Fosbury perfected and popularised a style for the high jump. He won a gold medal in the 1968 Summer Olympics. Prior to Fosbury, most elite jumpers used the straddle technique, a western roll or even a scissors jump to clear the bar. As I remember very clearly, this style known as ‘the flop’ required the final four or five steps being run in a curve and a special kind of take-off.

Everyone was doing it and it became an established pattern. Those who want to become great athletes watch others, so that they might achieve at a high level. With the high jump, height mattered, so I took to cross country running!

Some folks consider the Christian life as watching Jesus Christ perform and then trying to emulate him. To this we must say “Not at all!” Jesus Christ offers to come and indwell us.

By the influence and power of his Spirit, we are able to live his life through us. This has been the mark of all those saints of God throughout history.

We are his ‘saints’ then, if we give our lives entirely to Jesus Christ. And because his Holy Spirit lives in us, we can live the Christian life.

Tom Long, in his excellent commentary on Hebrews, talked about the congregation – that is believers today – joining a long chain which begins in the early part of the Old Testament and reaches to today. He then wrote a powerful chapter on being in the training room and talked about the Preacher’s congregation being tired. Our calling in Christ is to rise above the tiredness and the despondency and we are cheered on by all those who have gone before us in the Lord.