

# "All Saints"

Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> November 2009

Rev Brian Senior

## Readings:

Revelation 21:1-6a

1 Corinthians 12:12-21

## Sermon – Part 1

So today is All Saints Day ... and I'm wondering what you feel about the idea of being a saint?

The very word 'saint' conjures up for many of us an uncomfortable image of heroes in halos ... people from the past who were somehow a bit 'unreal' in their godliness.

We think of pious people who spent their lives on their knees in prayer and now stand around the throne of God **(OHT)** ... or else we think of warrior types who fought dragons and defended Christendom from the pagan hordes **(OHT)**.

Maybe the idea of being a saint isn't all that attractive?

So perhaps we need to re-think our mental picture of a saint ... to shift our thinking away from the ancient stained-glass window image, and more to that of the ordinary, contemporary Christian. Because that is what a saint really is ... as the Concise Oxford Dictionary puts it: "*one of God's chosen people; a member of the Christian Church*"

Is that better?

Thinking back to Commitment Sunday, you'll remember that we distributed these booklets - "**Belonging to the Church**" - to everyone, and we commissioned everyone to worship and serve God. As part of that commission, we declared our intention, with the help of God **(OHT)**:

- To continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers.
- To persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever we fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord.
- To proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ.
- To seek and serve Christ in all people, loving our neighbours as ourselves.
- To acknowledge Christ's authority over human society, by prayer for the world and its leaders, by defending the weak, and by seeking peace and justice.

If you missed Commitment Sunday or failed to get hold of one of the booklets, please take one today and read it carefully ... because **this** is the deal!

This is what we signed up to when we became disciples of Jesus Christ ... *not just* to what we believe in ... *not just* to who we will trust ... *but also* to what we will do.

We have made a commitment to belong to the Church which the Lord Jesus himself established, and to live as one of his saints ... the chosen people of God. God has called us to be a learning, sharing, growing, praying, evil-resisting, repentant, proclaiming,

serving, loving, peacemaking, justice-seeking community of believers ... growing together to be more like Jesus.

The wonder of Christian living is that we find that in doing these things ... in seeking to please him, and in living the life of a saint of God, we discover that this is where true joy is to be found.

The Church is meant to be a community of faith and love.

*Illustration: Get volunteers in various parts of the Church to stand. Place someone in the centre to represent God. Ask all to come closer to 'God' ... and notice where they now are in relation to one-another. (i.e. ... closer!)*

As we grow to closer to God we also grow closer to one-another, and if we're not very careful, love breaks out!

All this, of course, is a preparation for the life to come. As we turn to Revelation 21 we need first of all to take note that John writes in symbolic, apocalyptic language. We are not meant to interpret everything he says literally ... instead, we need to prayerfully consider the images and understand what God is saying to us through them.

John is given a vision of the end of the age, and writes about the judgment of the earth, the destruction of Satan, the remaking of the earth and the victory of the saints – that's us!

The 'New Jerusalem' is the final destination ... the place where God himself will dwell among his people. Notice that it comes '*down out of heaven from God*' in all its beauty and splendour, because our future home is not in heaven, sitting on a cloud playing a harp, but on the earth which will be renewed and restored to perfection.

What really strikes us, though, is the promise of what it will mean for us as God's people:

*"Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death, or mourning, or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."*

What an incredible vision of the future ... and it is *our* future!

In the hymn we are about to sing, verse 3 says this:

"I long to be where the praise is never-ending,  
Yearn to dwell where the glory never fades;  
Where countless worshippers will share one song,  
And cries of 'worthy' will honour the lamb!"

Are you looking forward with hope and anticipation? If for any reason you are not confident of your future in the presence of God, then I suggest you come for Prayer Ministry, and get that sorted out. God's promises are trustworthy and true, and are there for all who believe.

God has promised to his saints a future without sorrow or sadness ... without anxiety or disappointment ... without pain or struggle. All this is temporary ... and to all we who believe ... and trust ... and seek to live our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ - God says:

*"I am making everything new!"*

## **Sermon – Part 2**

A major part of what we are doing today is to consider, in the light of Commitment Sunday, what it means for us in practical terms to be part of this amazing community of saints which we call Church. If we are growing together to be more like Jesus, then what is my part in this process ... and what is yours?

The Church, as we have seen, is not a place that we go, or even a club to which we belong. It is something we become a part of when we become disciples of Jesus Christ.

There are a number of different pictures which the Bible uses to describe the Church, but perhaps the most compelling and powerful is the one Paul uses here in 1 Corinthians 12 ... the Body of Christ. It works so well because it reminds us that although we are one – a unit – we are also very different.

Sometimes our differences can be a problem to us. Because we are different, we all have different likes and dislikes:

- One person prefers modern worship songs, another prefers traditional hymns.
- Some people like Prayer Book language; others may wish the Vicar would learn to rap. (Probably not too many in that category, to be honest – for which I am relieved!)
- One person likes informal worship with things to do, another prefers to listen.
- One person, dare I say it, enjoys cafe-style worship, and another finds it distracting.
- Some don't mind if we are here all day, others wish we could go home in an hour.

There is one thing which is absolutely certain ... it doesn't matter what we do or how we organise our worship ... there will always be someone who wishes it was different! We are all individuals, and we all have our preferences ... and the challenge is how we come to terms with those differences and go on loving one-another.

The same applies to what we contribute to the Body. It has to be said that Paul doesn't envisage a situation where there is anyone who contributes *nothing*. For, as he says:

*"We were all baptised by the one Spirit into one body ... and we were all given the one Spirit to drink."*

In other words, if the Holy Spirit of God dwells within each one of us, then he has equipped us to play our part in the life of the Church. Not he will, notice, but he has. A promise!

It may be that some of us have not yet discovered what that particular gift or contribution is ... but it is there nonetheless, and part of the point of this service is to help us all to begin to discover what God wants us to be doing as part of his Church, here at St Philip's.

There are two contrasting ways in which we can get this business spectacularly wrong ... and clever as we are, we are capable of doing both at the same time.

First, it is all too easy for us to look at someone else in the Church and think, 'I wish I

was confident enough to do that' ... or 'If only I was as good at talking to people as he is' ... or 'It would be OK if I could be as practical as her.' Paul puts it this way:

*"If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body."*

This is crazy thinking. We don't need a dozen Church Wardens or twenty people in the Music Group. We aren't all called to be Readers or Evangelists or Pastoral Assistants. We don't want the place packed on a Saturday morning with people arranging the flowers.

We are all uniquely made in the image of God, and we all reflect his character, albeit imperfectly, in different ways. Why is it that we so easily look at other people and wish we could do what they do, instead of looking at ourselves and asking God what he wants us to do?

To make the point, Paul paints a very silly picture for us:

*"If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be?  
If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?"*

Just hold that picture in your mind for a moment!

Sadly, there is a second way in which we can mess up, which is potentially even more dangerous. It is all too easy for us to get into the mindset of thinking that what we bring to the table is especially important, and more useful than what someone else has to offer.

*"The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!"  
And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!""*

Once we start to get an over-inflated opinion of ourselves, we really are sunk. There lies the way to a critical spirit that sees the faults in everyone else ... that thinks that I'm the only one around here doing any useful work ... and which is actually suggesting that God has somehow got it wrong!

The truth is that we all have a part to play ... and every part is vital to the health of the Church. Some of us are called to up-front roles that everyone notices ... some are called to quiet, background work, which is no less essential. The captain of a ship could shout orders for all he was worth but to no effect, if there was no-one on duty in the engine room.

God does know what he is doing ... and he has given natural abilities and spiritual gifts to all his people for the work of the kingdom ... for the building up of the Church, and to equip us for mission. Don't doubt it. You have a vital role in the work of St Philip's.

And never despise what God has given you to do. He arranges things as he wishes, according to his priorities. We may sometimes wish we were something else, or that we had something different to give, but God chooses wisely because he knows us best ... and it is he that leads us on, in his own time, into new areas of ministry which we may never have imagined.

As we come in a moment to move around and look at ways in which we may be able to get involved, **(all encouraged to visit various 'stalls' around the Church over**

**coffee, to learn more of the breadth of ministry at St Philip's)**, ask God to open your eyes to what he may be showing you, and your ears to what he may be saying to you. Remember:

*"But in fact God has arranged the parts of the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body."*