

## All Saints

(Revelation 7:2-4.9-14 / Matthew 5:1-12)

01.11.2015

A line from the Sacred Scriptures has accompanied me these past days. I share it with you this morning, on this feast of All Saints.

I think of that line from Paul's Letter to the Romans (1:4) which reads: *You are God's beloved, called to be saints.*

Let us consider for a moment what we read there.

Each one of us is loved by God. We are all God's beloved.

Each one of us is called to holiness. We are called to sanctity as part of *God's Holy People*.

The invitation which I hear addressed to us today is an invitation to become more and more truly what we already are: God's saints.

This is our truest identity as members of the People of God. Each one of us is a saint.

This is how the New Testament speaks of the baptised: it refers to the baptised as God's saints. We well and truly live as saints when we live lives faithful to our baptismal vocation.

If people are to understand what it means to be a saint, I believe it is very important for us to understand and to present sanctity properly.

To be a saint is not to be (and always have been) impeccable.

So, what is it that makes someone a saint?

To be a saint is to be someone who is saved by God's grace. What makes someone a saint is their acknowledgement and welcoming of God's love and saving grace in their life.

Saints are not without their faults and flaws. Saints are not impeccable.

One can be a saint and get some things wrong.

Even those saints who have been canonised by the Church – and thus had their sanctity recognised and proclaimed by the highest authority within the People of God – will have gotten things wrong in their lifetime. They may well have misread certain situations and made errors of judgement along the way. I think of the criticisms made of John-Paul II to have been taken in by some people in his entourage during his lifetime. For some people this is proof that he was not a saint and should not be counted among those presented as models for others to follow. Fair enough, John-Paul is not a model to be followed when it comes to being taken in by those who, while advocate orthodox moral teaching and Church discipline, fail to live by the gospel – men such as Marcial Meciel, who was exposed to be in total disconnect and dis-accord with his public persona. Even with this major error of judgement, and others as well, John-Paul can still be considered a man of great holiness, a man whose life was animated by God's grace.

To be a saint is to be someone *made holy*.

Holiness is not our own affair alone. It is not of our own making. It is a God-given gift.

This is one of the very basic points of the whole of Paul's Letter to the Romans – a text which we have been reading these past weeks at weekday Eucharist.

For the apostle Paul, the Good News is more than just the sum of the events of Christ's life, passion, death and resurrection. It certainly includes all these things, but the Good News moves beyond the amazing events of Jesus' earthly lifetime and even His person. The Good News moves into our own sin-tainted and broken lives.

In the opening verses of his Letter to the Romans (from which the Scriptural verse which guides this reflection comes – Romans 1:4), we are told that we can become saints because of what Jesus accomplished for us in and through His paschal mystery.

Paul mentions in more than one place in his writings that the Good News comes down to this: we have been new life with Jesus. Indeed, *we are risen with Christ*. Speaking out of his own experience, at one point, Paul says: *I live, no longer I myself, it is Christ who lives in me*. We can rise to new life with Jesus and live our present life in Him, no matter where we have gone wrong along the way.

Paul states: *Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The past has gone. That person is an entirely new creature*.

We are risen with Christ. We are called to live our lives in the power of His resurrection. The late Cardinal Hume reminds us: *Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future*. That word gives us hope, does it not?

The sinners we know ourselves to be can become – and indeed already are – through God's gracious mercy, His saints.

Saints are never plaster-cast from the outset.

Unfortunately, too many plaster-cast images of canonised saints give the impression that they were not really men and women and children of flesh and blood.

The saints were never plaster cast figures in their lifetime. They were not statues. They were people just like us.

The saints (like the incarnate Christ) lived their lives of flesh and blood, they fully experienced their human condition with its inherent weaknesses, they felt the whole range of emotions known to each one of us.

These people who now live in God's glory lived their earthly existence of flesh and blood filled with the Holy Spirit.

In their lives of flesh and blood Christ's pascha has now been fully accomplished.

Speaking of the accomplishment of Christ's pascha in the saints, I find it very significant that in his Rule for Monks – in what is called the liturgical code of the Rule – when St Benedict speaks of the celebration of the saints of the Church calendar, he sees Saints' days being celebrated like Sundays in many respects. I consider this to be Benedict's way of reminding us that a saint is someone in whom the Easter mystery has been accomplished. It is those who live *in Christ* who are saints. It is those who live *in Christ* who are holy.

(That little phrase *in Christ* is so fundamental to Paul's theology and Christian anthropology.)

At this point I find myself thinking of an insight of the Christian writer, Brennan Manning. I find a little line of his greatly encouraging: *Human nature, freed from the slavery of sin, is capable of awesome holiness*.

The invitation addressed to us today is to take those words to heart and apply them to our lives.

We are *God's beloved called to be saints*. If God calls us to holiness, it is within our possibility to become holy, with the help of His grace.

Awesome holiness is what we are called to as members of God's People. I wonder if we really dare to believe this – not just for others, but also, each one of us, for ourself.

According to the gospel's criterion of holiness, the saints who are closest to the heart of Jesus are those who love most.

And so the key question and challenge of the Risen Christ to all of us is to be found in that question and challenge with which the Risen Jesus met Peter in that very beautiful post-resurrection appearance recorded for us in John 21: *Do you love me?*

Discipleship, the following of Christ, the call to holiness, are all about one thing: what St Benedict calls in his Rule for Monks, *preferential love for Christ*.

We are *to prefer nothing to Christ*.

To be given to religiosity is not to be engaged in the way of sanctity. To be given to religiosity is not to living as a follower of Christ, but to be living as a follower of religion. There are religious people who are not holy and there are holy people who are not particularly religious!

Remember, the criterion for holiness is love.

St John of the Cross says: *At the end of the day we will be judged on love.*

I repeat myself: holiness is about living in love. For holiness is about living in God.

We read in the First Letter of John: *God is love.* Living in God then is living in love. Living in love then is living in God.

There are/there can be religious people who are devoid of love. These people are not truly holy.

I started with a verse from Paul's Letter to the Romans, let me end with another verse from that same epistle.

In chapter 5 of Romans, Paul tells us: *The love of God is poured into our hearts by God's Holy Spirit.*

The Spirit who sanctifies is *love poured into our hearts.*

Let us open our hearts to that gift today.

It is to the extent that we are loving people that we are God's saints, living lives that are pleasing to Him and which bear witness to the awesome holiness of God in today's world.

Amen!