

8.00am All Saints and All Souls 2014

2nd November 2014

In our keeping of All Saints and All Souls we have a wonderful opportunity to give thanks for the lives, witness and service of Christian sisters and brothers across time and within the context of our own lives. And recently, as regards our celebration of All Saints, I have found my attention drawn to one of our three saints featured in the west window, namely, St Martin, who lines up with St Bartholomew and St George, and whose feast day, interestingly, is November 11th.

Martin was born and brought up in Hungary and was the son of a pagan soldier in the Roman army. This was in the 4th Century. When Martin came of age, he was conscripted. When however, he took up with the Christian faith as a young man he decided that military service was not compatible with his faith, and he left the army. This led to his imprisonment until the military engagement of the time was over. The episode, however, for which Martin is most remembered is his encounter in the city of Amiens with a nearly naked man begging for alms. Martin, moved by his plight, is said to have torn his cloak in two and given one half to the man to keep him warm. What then followed was that Martin had a dream, and he dreamt that he saw the figure of Christ in the form of the begging man, clothed in the cloak, that he Martin had given him. And this picture of Christ clothed in the cloak, and taking the form of the man who Martin had met in the street, provides for us a wonderful image of how Christ comes to us within the varied contexts of our lives in the shape of friend, neighbour or stranger – and that our calling as believers is always to respond to others, as Martin did, with the compassion and generosity of the Saviour. And when we reach out in this way, as in the dream, it is Christ who stares back at us.

What the vision of Christ as the begging man also points to, is one of the most basic affirmations of Christian faith, that Christ is incarnate in the world and is to be found and encountered in our dealings with others. Every person we meet is potentially a Christ – bearer, bearing Christ to us, and every time we respond with compassion and generosity Christ stares back at us with particular clarity. And it is perhaps one of the qualities of the saints that they are among those who have reached out to others in the most sacrificial and dedicated ways, and so they encourage us in our commitment to go and do likewise ... And in thinking of this calling, I am sure I am not alone in seeing a current shining example of this kind of saintliness which is evident in the courageous and dedicated people who are attending to their friends and neighbours and strangers in the current Ebola crisis in West Africa.

A fortnight ago I received a newsletter from Médecins Sans Frontières, who are in the forefront of responding in the battle against Ebola in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. And it was a humbling experience to read about the extraordinary compassion and commitment to the sick and dying that is being shown by the staff in the clinics, and at very great risk to themselves. And foremost in this holding back of a tide of suffering and despair, are the hygienists and cleaners who on a daily basis contend with the extreme medical condition of the patients in their care. A psychologist in one of the clinics wrote about the multiple challenges of handling these situations, dealing with the psychological impact in nightmares and flashbacks, dealing with sometimes overwhelming feelings of fear, sadness and despair, and then having to face rejection from friends in the villages because of the perceived threat they pose to them. And still they go on! Still they go on ministering to those who are

placed before them, who like St Martin, they meet in the street, in their case in their place of work.

To my mind these people, and the other staff who set aside their own safety and attend to what is before them are saints of the first order. And it is truly humbling to hear about, read about and sometimes listen to their testimony. People are being clothed with Christ through the sacrificial love of these fine human beings.

Our services today are marking, however, not only the witness of the saints, but also a commemoration of the faithful departed. And returning to the vision of St Martin, of Christ before him as the frail man of the street, clothed in the cloak of blessing, our thoughts may well turn to the vision in Revelation of the great multitude that is beyond numbering, that is gathered before the throne of grace, robed in white, who are giving glory and worship to the Lamb, who is Christ, on the throne – which is one of our most compelling pictures of the community of the faithful departed in the scriptures. And it seems to me that the robing in white and the clothing of the naked man in St Martin's vision, offer us a single picture of the divine embrace that is extended from God to all who will receive it, and which is spoken of in the verses that follow our reading from Revelation Ch 7, in which the figure of the Lamb is described as becoming their "shepherd" and "guide", and will lead them to springs of water and wipe away every tear from their eyes. Where the two visions, of St Martin and in the book of Revelation differ, however, is that whereas in the communal vision of heaven our own loved ones are indecipherable in the mele of rejoicing (and in that there is something to be grateful for perhaps), so on the other hand, as we think upon our own loved ones now departed, and we reflect on the vision of the frail Christ clothed in the cloak, I wonder if this offers us quite a personal window onto our individual remembrance of them. We might say, of course, that a frail figure is not the kind of lens through which we would choose to remember anyone, least of all our loved ones – rather we prefer to remember their accomplishments and their fine human qualities. And there is a great comfort in that.

But I do wonder if one of the truths of this occasion of All Souls is that we are exposed in moments of vulnerability, as we remember others fondly, actually to the full scope of the feelings that are at issue; so that alongside the affection and the gratitude we will experience rising up, so also, sometimes, the unanswered questions, the un-lived possibilities, the unspoken truths and the outstanding feelings can rise up too. And that where this is so, perhaps the figure of the frail man clothed with Christ is precisely where we find ourselves, as we both remember loved ones and contemplate our own frailty before God. And that, perhaps it maybe an even deeper comfort, as we remember, to be reminded that those we love, and we too, are forever clothed by Christ. And that his healing presence is bringing something to fruition, in them and in us, that is truly a blessing. It may happen beyond our comprehension, but it is surely happening – Christ is making all things new. And so I want to commend to us this vision of St Martin's both as a symbol of saintly discipleship and of meeting Christ in his stricken ones, and also as a reminder that those we have loved are enfolded in a divine embrace, and so are we, fragile and human as they were, fragile and human as we are – for in Christ the old is passing away and behold all things are being made new. Amen.

Reverend Julian Francis

2.11.2014.

