

All Saints Day – St Paul’s Manuka – 5 November, 2017.**Preacher: The Venerable Dr Brian Douglas****Revelation 7: 9-17****Psalm 34: 1-10, 22****1 John 3: 1-3****Matthew 5: 1-12**

In the grounds of Lambeth Palace, the place where Archbishops of Canterbury have lived for 800 years, there is a fig tree. It was planted there in 1556 by a former Archbishop of Canterbury, Cardinal Reginald Pole, the Archbishop of Canterbury under Mary Tudor. Pole planted the tree to celebrate trying his predecessor, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer for heresy and then for having him burnt at the stake. The tree remains there today.

As we come to All Saints Day we can perhaps think about the way that Christians, the saints of God, even Archbishops, have attacked and hurt each other. The saints of God are you and me, not just people in stained glass windows or those with saucer shaped halos around their heads. The saints of God, as that term is used in the Scriptures are the people of God – all those who seek to love God and their neighbour as themselves. It is these saints of God who have at times responded to each other with great love and care and yet also with great violence and hatred. Let’s not be too ready to condemn just Cardinal Pole since Cranmer himself had condemned many Roman Catholics and other non-conformists to the stake to be burnt and during the time of Elizabeth I many Roman Catholics were also burnt. The Reformation brought about much brokenness among Christians. Many saints of God brought this misery into being. There is much to value about the Reformation but also much to regret and much for which we should show great sorrow as we think about the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation.

Fast forward five centuries and you come to another Cardinal and another Archbishop of Canterbury. Cardinal Vincent Nichols is the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster and Archbishop Justin Welby is the present Archbishop of Canterbury. Recently Justin Welby attended a Eucharist at the Roman Catholic Cathedral in London. At the moment when it was time to receive Communion, Justin Welby went forward with others, knowing that because of the problems of the past he could not put his hands forward to receive the bread or receive the wine of the Eucharist. Instead he knelt and prayed for his good friend Cardinal Nichols. Nichols came to him and lifted him up. Both had tears in their eyes. They are the closest of friends but the hurt and hatred of the past has infected the present. They were both reminded of brokenness in this moment and that the saints of God can be sadly separated.

There is indeed much to mourn and much for which we should be sorry. Entirely against the teachings of Jesus Christ, Christians have learnt to hate, to exclude and to kill one another. People have sought to deny the faith of others and yet at moments like the meeting of the Cardinal and the Archbishop there is hope and the genuine meeting of the saints of God together – fractured yes but hopeful and genuine.

As we think this year about the so-called 500th anniversary of the Reformation and remember the actions of Martin Luther we must think too of the results of the Reformation – both those things which have worked for good and those which have brought about great pain. According to the story Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenburg – a church called All Saints – and it is this event that marks for many the beginning of the Reformation. There is now serious doubt that Luther actually did this but there is no doubt that he wrote his 95 theses, speaking out against the abuses of the medieval church. What Luther hit upon as he read and translated the Bible into German was that God offers us forgiveness of sin and the promise of eternal life, not on the basis of our works, the things we do and do not do, but on the basis of God's free gift of faith. What Luther saw is that we are justified before God on the basis of God's generous love and gift of faith and not on the basis of what we might do to in some way to earn our place in God's kingdom. We cannot earn that place. We are justified or put right with God, said Luther, only by responding to God's generous gift of faith. God, said Luther, takes the initiative, inviting us in and granting us faith, and it is as we respond to that gift that we come into a closer relationship with God and with one another. We become the saints of God in truth and love. This is not about us and what we do. It is about God and what God does.

As we come to this anniversary it is important for us as the saints of God not to dwell on the past. We should not forget the pain and the hurt but we cannot dwell on it. We must look ahead to the future and the way in which we as the saints of God are working together today. We can give thanks for example that the saints in the Roman Catholic Church and the saints in the Lutheran Church have come together in very important and meaningful ways. In recent years for example the two churches have been involved in extensive dialogue and produced a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. These two churches now share a common understanding of our justification by God's grace through faith in Christ. Recently the Pope has participated with Lutherans in marking not only the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, but more importantly the common understanding of justification by faith.

We Anglicans have welcomed this closeness between the saints of God. Nearly 50 years of dialogue with Roman Catholics has brought the Anglican

Communion into substantial agreement with that church on many significant issues of faith. Anglicans have also supported the developments between Roman Catholics and Lutherans. A recent meeting of the worldwide Anglican Consultative Council welcomed the joint statement on justification by faith and Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Anglican leaders are gathering this week at Westminster Abbey to not only celebrate the anniversary but also the agreement.

As the saints of God we go up the mountain with Jesus, just like the crowds did in the Gospel passage today. It was in this context that Jesus saw the people – the saints of God and spoke so powerfully. These words are so well known to us. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who are persecuted. There is so much here for us to consider as we celebrate All Saints Day. Yes there have been those who are poor in spirit because they see the fractured nature of Christ's church. Yes there are those, like the Cardinal and the Archbishop who mourn over this fracture and long for peace and harmony. We must be meek as we seek that unity. We cannot stand on our importance or our own works, but rather meekly open ourselves to the grace of God working among us to unite us and to strengthen us in love for God and for one another. There must be hunger and thirst for the righteousness of being God's people together. Let us give thanks for the dialogue between Roman Catholics and Lutherans and for our Anglican involvement in that making of peace. Let us show mercy to one another as we embrace others, who may differ from us in some ways but who, as God's loved people, are also justified or put right with God, just like us, through the love and mercy of God. Let us remember all those faithful souls who have been persecuted for the sake of their faith. Let us not forget them but let us also use their example as a means of uniting us to move forward in the love of God and one another. As Jesus tells us today; 'Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven'.

The saints of God are you and me. Today on this All Saints Day we celebrate our life together in the love of God. Today we celebrate that we the saints of God are put right with God through God's generous gift of faith and love. Help us to remember our past but let us not stay there, mired in the hatred and violence of the past. Let us move instead to a new status as members of the kingdom of heaven, as people who receive and give comfort, as people who care for the earth, as people who are filled with the love of God, as people who show mercy, as people who see God and live as children of God. It is in so seeking that we have the righteousness of God as a free gift. On this All Saints Day let us rejoice and be glad.