

ALL SAINTS' SUNDAY, 2011

The Rt Rev'd Jonathan Baker, SSC

Saint Joseph of Cupertino, the levitating, ecstatic young friar of seventeenth-century Italy, fittingly now the patron saint of pilots and airline passengers. Saints Simpronian, Claudius, Nicostratus, Castorius and Simplicius, Roman stonemasons and Christians who refused to carve statues of the gods, and who are commemorated in a mosaic in the church of the Santi Quattro Incoronati on the Caelian Hill. Saint Procopius who lived on bread and water and, according to the church historian Eusebius of Caesarea, 'had reduced his body until it looked like a corpse, but his soul drew from the word of God such strength that the body was refreshed too.' St Ursula, a British princess who, according to legend, sailed along the Rhine to Cologne with eleven thousand maiden companions, where the leader of the Huns fell in love with her; she spurned him, and he killed her, and all the eleven thousand too. It is the diversity of the company of the saints which astonishes, but should not surprise us; for the saints can only come from the people of God, the baptised, those whom St Paul in his letters repeatedly addresses as the saints, the holy ones, in this or that region or city: and the people of God are us, each of us uniquely made in the image and likeness of God.

Though we are used to thinking of the saints as our great exemplars in the faith, models of Christian discipleship whose patterns of life we are called to imitate and to whose spiritual heights we too can aspire, the examples - the randomly chosen examples - of those whom the Church has raised to her altars with which I began reminds us that this is not the whole story. I doubt that many here consider the ability to float unaided above the ground a virtue which they hope to acquire in the name of holiness; nor, ladies among us, if you could find 11,000 maiden companions would you be expected take them off in a fleet of galleons in order to meet certain death at the hands of a bloodthirsty warrior crazed with lust. Although it is extraordinary where some people's fantasies lie. No, there is a recklessness and a kind of *folie de grandeur* in the lives of many of the saints which teaches us quite properly that the Christian faith is not a dry, sanitised, cerebral thing, however much the exercise of our reason is central to it: it is embodied, incarnated, in the lives of men and women with all the potential for extraordinary, uncontrollable and (in the world's eyes) downright dangerous behaviour which that brings. No wonder the saints have often be likened to the church's *fireworks*, and not just because of the close proximity, in this country, of the feast to the secular celebrations of bonfire night: they fizz and crackle and create the sparks in the body of Christ, with often unpredictable results. Look out when the life of a saint of God collides with your own.

Then again, as we are frequently reminded on this day, All Saints-tide is as much about celebrating the countless **unknown** holy ones of God – unknown, that is, except to Him alone – as it is about calling to mind those whose feast days and commemorations punctuate the liturgical year. These, the men and women who pursue lives of quiet holiness, constitute the vast majority of the blessed, and their number grows day by day and year by year. S. Matthew, collecting and handing on Our Lord's preaching in the 'Sermon on the Mount,' gives us a series of clues as to what we are to look for in the lives of the unknown saints; and, at first blush, it sounds absurd: they will be the destitute, the sad, the meek, those concerned for justice, the merciful, those who concentrate exclusively on God, those who refuse to take the path of violence, those who are persecuted. But read today's Gospel again, and you will come to see the profound wisdom in what Jesus offers, for he promises that God's favour rests on all those whose lives are the complete opposite of those upon which the world usually heaps praise and congratulation, and thank God for that. Just occasionally, the world catches up with this real wisdom, and recognises in some particular person – a Mother Theresa of Calcutta, for example – all the hallmarks of a life marked with that true blessedness which comes from God.

Perhaps – more than likely, in fact – the Sermon on the Mount will leave us as puzzled as to our own path to holiness as the lives of those more extraordinary saints with which I began. We know ourselves well enough to admit that for much the greater part of the time, our lives are very far from being distinguished by those qualities of blessedness which Our Lord proposes. We hunger for success and popularity rather than righteousness; we aim to rely on ourselves rather than on God; we shrink from persecution and seek the quiet life. But here too there is much ground for encouragement. Any study of the lives of the saints, those whom the church counts and recognises as saints, will prove beyond any shadow of a doubt that they are not a collection of individuals characterised by seamless and unblemished holiness: they include the grumpy, the bad-tempered, the headstrong and those whose lives are frequently marked by conflict, doubt and back-sliding from the path of faith. Sanctification – the sanctification of those whom the church calls saints, and our own sanctification – is not a matter of steady progression, as if from GCSE to A Level to degree to doctorate in the school of holiness; it is bumpy, zig-zagged, marked by a series of lesser and greater U-turns. The real question is not: what progress are we making?, but rather, what, or rather, who do we have in view as our end, our goal, our fulfilment? The answer to that, if we are to be saints, must be – God. This is what the church's little phrase *heroic virtue*, used as the measure of a candidate's potential for formal canonisation, really means – do we see in this person's character and conduct a determination to put God at the centre of their life, especially at times of crisis? That, of course, is the distinguishing characteristic *par excellence* of the martyrs, those who literally held their very lives to count for less than their witness to their Lord; and the overwhelming majority of those whom Christians first believed to be saints, in the special and formal sense of the word,

were martyrs. The martyrs continue to constitute the single largest class or category of saints, and their number grows still, year by year. The twentieth century, the century of world wars and godless tyrannies, yielded an extraordinary harvest of Christian martyrs, including some – S Maximilian Kolbe, S Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein) – whose witness to the faith in the most dreadful circumstances is truly inspirational. But even where the loss of life itself was not at stake, so often we see that point of decision for God as the essence of that heroic virtue which makes a saint: S. Thomas Aquinas, so determined to become a Dominican friar that he held out for fifteen months in captivity imposed by his own family, who wanted to marry him off to a rich heiress instead; S. Ignatius of Loyola, exchanging military uniform or that of a beggar and a pilgrim, the better to follow Christ; and then, whether we agree with all his theological reasoning or not, we might mention Blessed (if not yet Saint) John Henry Newman, whose Christian conscience led him to risk reputation, friends and livelihood for a unknown and untested future.

Whether we are daunted or encouraged by the example of the saints – and, if daunted, we should at least draw huge comfort from the assurance of their prayers – we can at least be confident that God has given us all the gifts and graces that we need to become His saints. Remember again that, in the New Testament, it is all the people of God, all the followers of Jesus Christ in a particular church or city, who are the saints; the distinction between the baptised and the canonised is unknown in the infant Church, however properly the Church has needed to make that distinction later on. By baptism, we are made holy; sanctification is the bringing to perfection in us of what we have already been given – given, note, not earned by our own merit.

Each of the sacraments is given to deepen the gift of holiness given in baptism; each strengthens us on the path of holiness, the path along which we travel in order to become the saints we are called to be. The sacrament which is, of course, most frequently available to us, is the Eucharist; and attendance at the Liturgy, the Mass, and the prayerful reception of Holy Communion will work away at us, and covert us, little by little but almost irresistibly, into those saints we are intended to be. It is not for nothing that the Church appoints the passage we heard from the Revelation of S. John the Divine as the first reading at the Mass for All Saints' Day. That part of S. John's extraordinary book is an attempt to depict the worship of heaven, which reflects the worship of the Christian community on earth: in other words, it is an imaginative interpretation of the people of God, the baptised, clad in white robes, sharing in the liturgy, sharing in the celebration of the Eucharist, as much as it is a vision of heaven. The two – the liturgy of the Eucharist on earth, the worship of the saints and angels in heaven – intertwine and relate deeply one to another. Here, at the Mass, our eyes are indeed turned towards the one from whom all holiness flows and to whom all holiness belongs, the all-holy God; and we, raised, by baptism, to be given a share in His holiness, worship with all the saints on earth and in heaven, known and unknown; perhaps even the one sitting next to you this morning.

