

Sermon preached by the Revd Professor Mark Chapman, Ripon College, Cuddesdon on All Saints' Day, 2015 at Pusey House.

St Augustine once asked: 'Why can the dead do such great things?' His answer was informative: all the miracles and other feats performed from beyond the grave by the holy ones of God vindicate our faith in the resurrection. For Augustine, the great apostles and martyrs are still alive. They work for us and are still capable of acting on our behalf. It's not just that they led exemplary lives – they are still with us and helping us in all sorts of ways. Saints are not just past tense people to be emulated in the present. They are also present tense people who dwell around the throne of the almighty at this very moment and they are working for us.

The reading from Revelation is a vision of the elect standing before the throne of the Lamb. And of course they shine with a radiance that comes from the ascended Christ around whom that great company of the elect sing their everlasting praises. Gregory of Tours once said: 'Although there may be diversity of merit and power, one life of the Body nourishes them all'. And that is the life of the body of Jesus Christ.

For most of its history, the church has been obsessed by saints. It put their pictures on all sorts of walls and windows. In particular it remembered the martyrs and those who were persecuted and tortured for their faith: those are the saints of the Beatitudes. Think of those pictures of St Lucy carrying her eyes, or St Agatha with her breasts on a plate, or St Catherine with her wheel. All rather gruesome reminders of the persecution of the early martyrs. And it preserved their bits and pieces or the things they touched, and sometimes built great edifices around their tombs or relics.

Earlier this year I was in the great church at Ephesus where St John the Evangelist lies buried, and I also visited that great pinnacle of Gothic art, the Sainte Chapelle in Paris – which was built by St Louis to house the Crown of Thorns. That relic was one up on most other churches, which was useful for a medieval King of France.

Great churches and little churches contained the material relics of those who had ascended to heaven to sit around the body of Christ and whose own bodies had been transfigured by the radiance of his ascended body – the great abbey of Abingdon that once ran my village had St Vincent, an early martyr. One can stare at the great and beautiful reliquaries in the churches and museums of Europe and think about how they connected the past with the present – the relics might still be brought out for healing or blessing the congregation or for special occasions; and many people will visit the great relics like the Holy Shroud in Turin which was on show this summer. Those relics serve to connect our frail bodies through the saints' glorified

bodies to Christ's ascended body. Past, present and future make little sense when we talk about the saints.

So today we are celebrating a eucharist to remember All Saints and we do so in the hope that they will remember us. Even if Lollards and their killjoy successors who dominated our church for so long never appreciated this sort of theology, I don't mind asking the saints to come to our aid as they plead at the throne of God on our behalf.

We often imagine the saints surrounding the throne of God – standing before the throne of the Lamb as the first reading had it. All Saints' Day always takes us to the feast of the Ascension – a feast that connects heaven and earth, but also a feast of the body. The body has gone up to heaven, and yet we can still share in that body. And saints too have bodies – they have been raised in body and it is those bodies that are sharing with that heavenly body, not through sacrament but face to face.

Saints for me are crucial reminders of the historical reality and the physicality of the resurrection. We believe in the resurrection of the body – the body constitutes the mark of sanctity. That's at the heart of the Christian faith, and of the resurrection appearances, and of the bodily ascension. Jesus can still be touched – and that is obviously quite a scandal. And even when Jesus sits at the right hand of his Father, there is still a body that does the sitting. And that body is surrounded by the bodies of the saints. That is the unspeakable joy of sainthood

A few years ago I took my elder son to Trier in Germany. It was one of the largest cities of the Roman Empire with probably 100,000 people – the same size as today – and it has a huge palace where the western Emperors lived. The walls are still covered in Roman paintings. They match anything in Asia Minor or Italy. Constantine's mother, Helena, lived there and her head is still preserved in the Cathedral, which was created out of the palace in the fourth century. It is the oldest see north of the Alps, and the enormous Roman basilica is by far the largest Roman building (and is now the protestant church since the Prussians re-roofed it).

It was Helena who was well known for getting hold of relics – and most famously the bits and pieces of the true cross, and other high class relics like the seamless robe which is still preserved in Trier Cathedral. She is also reputed to have given Matthias's bones to the great church named after the apostle. (The sceptic might take note that the bones were only rediscovered in 1127 during demolition work on the earlier church). It's still a place of pilgrimage – and it has been for many hundreds of years. The church has just been restored and is a wonderful place: in the crypt the air and smell of sanctity is tangible.

For me, it's always moving to visit these places where we can sense something of the power of the dead who have joined the communion of the saints and who have been raised with Christ whose body they surround. It is often deeply moving – it speaks both of the piety of the past but also of the bodiliness of our faith in the present. With the saints we are taken up to heaven which is not a realm of spirits but a realm of dead and resurrected bodies.

Quite often, of course, the containers of relics are more impressive than the contents. And no doubt a lot of the bits of bone are of quite different people and were sold in the middle ages to many a gullible pilgrim. Chaucer's Pardoner peddled the shoulder bone of a holy Jew's sheep. I am very aware of the mixed motives behind pilgrimages and relics – there was a lot of one-upmanship between cities. Trier only had Matthias and the Holy Tunic whereas nearby Cologne had the bones of the wise men, those men who had actually seen the baby Jesus.

But however strange it might sound there is still something very important about saints and their relics. They are very real reminders that the Christians of the past were physical, like you and me: The saints were real men and women with real bodies and they lived their lives in real places in real history. The cults of the saints are about acts of devotion and venerating the bodies of those who left their mark on history and who left things behind. Relics and the like may no longer be at the heart of our religion – and that is probably right; after all, the relic was often little more than a talisman to ward off demons or evil spirits. Saints who turned into greyhounds were not uncommon; and lots of others have been demoted (like Catherine of Alexandria, one of the great cults of the middle ages). But however disreputable some of the practices became, it is still true that sainthood is a physical thing: Christianity is a religion about souls *and* bodies and is a religion that worships a God who also has a glorified body. The relic, the statue and the picture are all important. They remind us that those who tried to follow Christ were made of flesh and bones like me and like you, and like Christ himself.

And what is more that very same body is now reformed in heaven in the glorious light of the resurrection and ascension. Christ may have gone into heaven but he descends to us and we ascend to him – as we too sit next to him in the glory of heaven. See his body in the bodies of the saints – in the great saints like Peter and Mary and Paul; but also see his body in the little saints like you and like me.

In my college there is a lock of hair that came from one of my predecessors as vice-principal, Henry Liddon, Dr Pusey's biographer and one of the great preachers of late Victorian England. I walk past it several times a day. And as I do so it reminds me of the physicality of those who have gone before; they were people like us, with legs and arms and all the rest of

what it is to be a human being. And they were transfigured by the glorious body of the one who ascended to the Father. The ascended body descends into our bodies.

Of course, that's quite unbelievable and quite irrational; but look at the body in the bread; eat it and be consumed by heaven; and look at that glorified body in the body of the person sitting next to you – there's another saint preparing ascend to heaven and whose body will sit before the throne of that ascended body of Christ our Lord and whose body has descended into ours. That is the unspeakable joy at the heart of the Christian life – the life of sainthood. Amen