

The Culture of the Saints – Exile, Example and Encouragement

A sermon preached in the Chapel of the Resurrection, Pusey House, Oxford, at the High Mass on Wednesday, 1 November 2023 (All Saints' Day), by The Reverend Dr Jamie Franklin, Vicar, Holy Trinity, Winchester

ISAIAH 66:20-23; REVELATION 7:2-12; ST. MATTHEW 5:1-2

YOU will doubtless have heard of the phrase “The Cult of the Saints” – a phrase that we often associate with the High Middle Ages to refer to the interplay between the faithful upon earth and the saints in heaven. Today, I want to speak to you about the culture of the saints.

What is a culture? A culture is the way of life of a particular people, their customs, their manners, their language, their particularities. In the Beatitudes of Christ, we see perhaps the clearest picture in all of Scripture of the culture of the saints. Who are the saints? What should their customs be? How should they conduct themselves in this world?

I want to pick out three key themes that come to us from the Beatitudes and that are most especially relevant on All Saints' Day.

Exile

The first and most unmistakable aspect of the culture of the saints is that the saints in this world are in exile. We are, in the words of the Apostle Peter, “elect exiles” (1 Peter 1:1). Our citizenship – that is, our true homeland, the place of our real identity – is in heaven, as is said by the Apostle Paul (Phil. 3:20).

Therefore, there will always be a sense of not being quite at home in this age. Many of you will have had the experience of going abroad, or even to a different part of the country, and experiencing a sense of not quite fitting in, feeling odd, as though the fabric of the world around you isn't quite right. This is the way of the saints in this age: we are out of step with the ways of the world, with the zeitgeist, with what is morally or social fashionable. And this is the right thing for the saints. As Christ says in the equivalent passage in Luke 6, “Woe to you when all men shall

“speak well of you! For so did their fathers to the false prophets” (Luke 6:26).

What should the saints in this age expect from the world? The answer is given to us in Matthew 5:11-12: “Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you”.

I want to speak of a false hermeneutic that exists in the Church and that has always existed in the Church. And that is the false hermeneutic that tells us that we are to conform ourselves to the culture in order to be relevant to the culture and so loved by it. Consider the facts: not just in the teaching of Christ, but in his example, and in the example of the prophets, the apostles and the martyrs of the Church, we are not called to placate the world. We are not called to conform ourselves to its standards.

Rather, we are the heralds of God’s Kingdom. We are the sentinels of another world that stand for Christ, embodying in ourselves the values of repentance and faith, and calling the unconverted to imitate our example. We are not the thermometer, but we are the thermostat. It is for the world to convert itself to Christ and not for us to convert ourselves to the world.

My point of application here is that we must decide now which culture we want to be a part of: the culture of this age, with its passing fashions, with its confused ideology, with its inability to cope with any of its most serious problems; or the culture of the saints, which is a partial manifestation upon the earth of the everlasting Kingdom of Heaven?

Put more bluntly: if you want to be a saint, you must decide now that you don’t mind being scorned by the world, being thought less of, being spoken against, perhaps even being persecuted by others. In a place like Oxford, recognise the temptation to want to be seen as intelligent, as knowing, as good enough to be in this place. Recognise that vanity and that emptiness and that futility for what it is, and resolve in the secret place of the heart to be first and foremost a child of God, seeking in simplicity and faith to know Christ and to be faithful to Him, come what may. The enemy will do whatever he can to get you to compromise on your faith: *you can’t possibly think that, can you, because that would put you outside of the realms of respectability. Best to just go along with it and agree with the received wisdom.* Friends, we must shun such things.

Resolve to belong to the culture of the saints and not to the culture of Oxford, this world, or anywhere else.

Example

The second thing that All Saints' Day does for us is that it calls us to imitate the example of the saints. Again, not to look around us at what everyone is doing in this world, but to look up to heaven, and to consider the way of life of those who went before us, and to look around at the examples of holiness that God has given us to imitate today.

The Beatitudes describe to us the example of the culture of the saints. It is easy to overlook how radical the Beatitudes were in their day, and how radical they remain, particularly as our culture moves farther and farther away from its Christian inheritance.

If we were to try and summarise them, we would say that they describe people who are humble, repentant, undivided in their desire for holiness. They describe those who, although they mourn, are nevertheless at peace within themselves and seek to make peace in the world. They are those who are meek and yet nevertheless expect to inherit the earth and to receive the Kingdom of God.

They are a manifesto for us to meditate upon and to embody in our lives. Again, consider the ways of this age and the temptations which are common to all of us: to be proud, to refuse to repent of our sinful patterns of behaviour, to live as though there were no God and as though we had no need of him, to accuse others of wrongdoing instead of admitting our own faults, to seek material gain, wealth, power and fame as the highest goals of life.

I am not seeking to be in any way political in this sermon, but consider how different the world might be if all people took to heart the teachings of Christ in the Beatitudes. I have recently read a book called *Son of Hamas*, which is about the eldest son of one of the founders of Hamas, Mosab Hassan Yousef. As a young man, Mosab was arrested and horrifically tortured by the Israelis for possessing firearms. He was consumed by hatred for the Israelis, but similarly despaired at the futile brutality of Hamas and the intractable brokenness of the entire situation in Israel and Palestine. It was some time after his arrest that he was invited to a Bible study and read the New Testament for the first time.

'I began at the beginning, and when I got to the Sermon on the Mount, I thought, *Wow, this guy Jesus is really impressive! Everything he says is beautiful.* I couldn't put the book down. Every verse seemed to touch a deep wound in my life. It was a very simple message, but somehow it had the power to heal my soul and give me hope.

Then I read this: "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:43-45).

For years I had struggled to know who my enemy was, and I had looked for my enemies outside of Islam and Palestine. But I suddenly realized that the Israelis were not my enemies. Neither was nor my uncle Ibrahim nor the kid who beat me with the butt of his M16 nor the apelike guard in the detention center. I saw that enemies were not defined by nationality, religion, or color. I understood that we all share the same common enemies: greed, pride, and all the bad ideas and the darkness of the devil that lives inside us.

That meant I could love anyone. The only real enemy was the enemy inside me.'

Son of Hamas, Mosab Hassan Yousef with Ron Brackin, p.122

It might seem that the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount are teaching us to be weak and pathetic, as Friedrich Nietzsche said. But the reality is that the teachings of Christ are the only way to bring true peace to the earth: to recognise our own sin, to repent and to live in humility; to recognise also our need for God to help us and to satisfy our souls with joy; and to be an embodiment of that peace and joy that we have found in God, not adding to the futile cycles of violence and recrimination, but urging our fellow men towards the kind of humility and forgiveness that we seek to live out in faithfulness to the teaching of Christ. This is something of what Mosab Hassan Yousef discovered in his encounter with Christ, to whom he would eventually be completely converted. He is bold enough to say now that this is the *only* solution for peace in the Middle East.

Encouragement

Finally, encouragement. I learned to drive in my early twenties. Most of my friends had passed their test by that point. Learning to drive takes a while and there is a lot to take in. There were points during that time when I felt discouraged. I failed my first test, for example, and had to find a new instructor because my first one packed it in. But an encouraging thought to me that recurred throughout that period was: "Look at all

those other people out there on the road. They have done it. And they don't seem too dissimilar to me. Therefore, I can do it as well." And, of course, I did...eventually.

Anyway, the point is that the culture of the saints give us a similar type of encouragement. In the Beatitudes, Christ speaks of the prophets 'which were before you' (Matthew 5:12). James 5:17 tells us that Elijah was 'a man with a nature like ours'. The point being that a life of holiness is possible for all men and women. And we know this because we are witnesses of the saints and confessors, both of Apostolic times and of the history of the Church.

They have done it before us, and so we can do it too. God strengthened them, and so we can be confident that He will strengthen us also.

Is there something that you are facing in the Christian life that feels insurmountable? If God has truly called you to it, then he will be faithful and give you the means that you need to rise to the challenge. It is no greater challenge than the saints before you have faced and overcome through the grace of God. Therefore, you will overcome it to if you look to the Lord for your help.

Are you afraid of some horror that lies in the future? Perhaps the death of a loved one, or your own? And yet we know, because we have seen it so many times, that God will grant us the strength we need, not only to live a holy life, but also to die a faithful death.

He has strengthened many before us, and he will strengthen us also.

So, let us consider all of these things today, and let us resolve to embody the culture of the saints and not that of this passing age. Let us imitate the examples that the saints have set before us and that are spoken of in the Beatitudes. And let us look to the saints for encouragement when we are weary and in need of strength. In their lives, God has shown his faithfulness many times, and we have good confidence to believe that he will do so again for us.

Amen.