All Saints’ Day

Saints are very popular these days. For example, Southampton Football Club is known as "The Saints", and in the Scottish football league we have St Mirren, among two or three other Saints. In the Rugby Union world, Northampton has always been known as "The Saints" too.  I'm sure there are many other clubs in the sporting world who like to be called Saints. If you are asking yourself why this should be, I'll tell you.

In the early years of the 19th century, Anglican parishes were very concerned for the young men and boys who just hung around with little to do. So they started football clubs in the Vicar' s garden or on church land. They were hugely popular. Soon a church club would have two or three teams, and they began competing with other church teams. The teams took the name of their church. So in the early 1800s, for example, Southampton FC was St. Mary's. When football became more organised, they took the town's name but kept Saints as their nickname. In this way, you can see there is a link between the church and our English traditional ball game. Usually, churches are dedicated to a saint or saints, and, in the past, members of those church football clubs were very proud to be playing for their patron saint.

From another angle, we should celebrate the concern of those lay folk and clergy of earlier times for young adults.The church was not as dull and uncaring as it is often made out to be. The clergy, too, were often very with it, in down to earth ways, to bring people fun and joy in their lives. They stood on the touch line with their parishioners and cheered the team on. Some of them joined in the games. Parson and people together took part in so many of these social enterprises. We should remember that with pride. So church and saints go together quite happily.

In our churches, saints are usually thought of as supremely holy people. They appear in our stained-glass windows, or as statues in wood or stone. Artistically, they may be excellent, but I find them a bit unreal. They don't seem to be ordinary. They are so often the artist's idea of holiness. That idea doesn't always match the *qualities* of holiness I find in the teachings of Jesus.

We heard about holiness in the Beatitudes in St Matthew chapter 5. Jesus didn't use the word ‘holy’ but He talked about blessedness. When I was at school, we had to learn the Beatitudes by heart! Putting them into present day English, we can say:

**Be humble. No airs and graces.**

**Be forgiving. No holding things against others.**

**Be a bringer of peace. No trouble making.**

**Take criticism. No getting back at others.**

**Try to live your life after the pattern of our Lord**

It's the combination of these down-to-earth things which creates holiness. There's a part of our human make-up which will resist these lovely qualities; but there is also a spiritual part of our make-up which will help us when we try to be like them and do them.   Holiness is a kind of light which shines through our ordinariness, as we make the effort to live these qualities. A light shining through what you are.

That idea lies behind an old gospel hymn of the American south. You know it well. "Oh, when the saints go marching in". I can tell you, it originated in New Orleans in one of the churches in about 1900. It was written by a coloured woman who lived a hard life, tried her best to live it well, and hoped to go to heaven.  Folk then had a picture of heaven as an army of those who had tried to live a good life. Saints they were. To be one of them was thought of as a great prize. Their prayer was "Oh, I want to be in that number when the saints go marching in." It is a great hymn for the season of All Saints, especially when sung with verve, and accompanied by a good band in the style of Louis Armstrong.

So, I've told you about saints in a rather unusual way. They are not just stained glass or carved figures in churches. They are ordinary folk trying to follow the way of life taught by Jesus. We all belong to what the church calls ‘the Communion of Saints’. And all of us hope to be in that number when the saints go marching in.

So let’s go on trying!