

Worship @ Home

Sunday 1st November 2020

All Saints Day

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Call to worship

Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,
let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.
Being members one of another in the body of Christ,
let us be united in one Spirit holding onto the bonds of peace.
As part of the household of faith, within the whole people of God,
let us celebrate the communion of saints. Amen.

Welcome

Today is November 1st.

All Saints Day.

The day when we traditionally remember the saints who have gone before us.

But what is a saint?

A couple of weeks ago, Pope Francis beatified a computer whizz-kid, who died of leukaemia aged 15 in 2006.

Carlo Acutis showed signs of devotion from an early age.

When he was 3, he would always ask his parents to stop and go inside when they passed a church.

He taught himself to code as a child, and designed websites for Catholic charities.

After his death, a seven-year-old boy from Brazil recovered from a rare pancreatic disorder after coming into contact with one of Carlo's T-shirts.

This miracle has put Carlo on the path to sainthood – beatification is the first step.

Is this what it is to be a saint?

Back at the start of the first lockdown there was a flurry of interest in Saint Corona.

She was a 2nd century martyr, who was killed for supporting a Roman Soldier who had illegally become a Christian.

She is the patron saint of plagues and epidemics.

You can see why she was suddenly top of the Google online searches.

Is this what it is to be a saint?

But I think a Saint is more than just a wonderworker.
Or a talisman against something that makes us anxious.
This morning we'll think about what makes a saint.
About the saints we have known.
And perhaps we'll do some beatification of our own...

You may have made a Celtic Knot from the template on our website.
If you have, you'll need it, and a pen and some coloured pencils, for our prayers later in the service.
If not, now's the time to get a sheet of paper, the back of an envelope, anything to write on.
Or just use your imagination....

MUSIC (StF 530)

To be in your presence
To sit at your feet
When your love surrounds me
And makes me complete

To rest in your presence
Not rushing away
To cherish each moment
Here I would stay

This is my desire, o Lord
This is my desire
This is my desire, o Lord
This is my desire

This is my desire, O Lord...

Noel Richards

Let us pray

Creative God,
with all that lives and breathes and has being,
we worship and adore you.
Companion Christ,
with the apostles, prophets, saints and martyrs,
we give thanks and praise to you.
Charismatic Spirit,
with all the Church, past, present and to come,
we celebrate and sing your glory.

Friend and Lover of the faithful,
forgive us for our falling short
of the examples of the saints.
When we lack humility, remind us
of Agnes of Rome and Cuthbert of Lindisfarne.
When we lack courage,
remind us of Catherine de Ricci and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.
When we lack commitment,
remind us of Anthony of Egypt and Clare of Assisi.
When we lack discipline,

remind us of Benedict and Mother Teresa.
When we lack vision,
remind us of Hildegard of Bingen and Brother Roger of Taizé.
When we lack faithfulness,
remind us of Hilda of Whitby and Paul, apostle to the Gentiles.
When we lack wisdom,
remind us of Julian of Norwich and Thomas Aquinas.
When we lack love,
remind us of Valentine of Rome and Brigid of Kildare.
When we are faced with persecution,
remind us of Janani Luwum of Uganda and Perpetua of North Africa.
With all the redeemed assure us
of your grace for our needs,
and meet our confession with your mercy.
In the name and Spirit of Jesus Christ
Amen.

Matthew 5: 1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Reflection

If I were the Pope – now that’s a sentence you don’t often hear at the start of a sermon in a Methodist or URC church!

If I were the Pope, I would beatify Marcus Rashford.

Not because people worship his footballing skills.

Though his hat trick against Leipzig on Thursday was pretty fab.

Not because kids think his T shirt is miraculous.

Though that number 10 is probably a lucky number for quite a few fans.

Not because yesterday was his birthday.

Though Halloween is quite a cool day for a birthday.

Not because he was given an MBE while he was still 22.
Which is probably the secular equivalent of beatification.

So why?

Let's take a step back.

On Thursday, I attended a zoom seminar on mental health during the COVID pandemic.

It was fascinating.

The presenters took us through some of the current research on how COVID affects our mental health. They explained that during the first wave of the pandemic, everyone moved up a notch in their emotional and psychological state.

So if you were coping pretty much OK with life before March, you would notice increased anxiety.

If you were already an anxious person, you might find your anxiety really life-limiting.

If you were already struggling with depression, you might find yourself in a black hole of despair.

In the second wave – which is where we are now, this autumn, mental health researchers have observed two almost opposite reactions.

The first is what they call 'learned helplessness'.

We did everything you told us to – and it's still not working.

We might as well give up.

There's nothing we can do that will make any difference.

It's all hopeless.

The second is 'Eat, drink and be merry'.

If nothing works in stopping the spread of the pandemic, we may as well get on with enjoying ourselves.

Break the rules.

Go for a drink with a crowd of mates.

Stop wearing those uncomfortable masks.

Plan for a Christmas meal with seven people!

Marcus Rashford has avoided both of these temptations.

In his campaign to get the government to fund meals for hungry children during the school holidays, he has neither given up entirely, nor focused on his own pleasure.

He has made a difference.

So what has this got to do with being a Saint?

I'd like to look at three elements of what Marcus Rashford is doing.

Characteristics that, for me, are the marks of a Saint.

Because of course a Saint is not just someone whom the Pope has chosen to beatify.

When Jesus preaches the sermon on the Mount, which we heard in today's reading, he calls all people saints – Makarios – blessed – who live out of kingdom values.

So first of all, Marcus Rashford notices that there is a problem.

Kids who are getting a decent meal while they are at school might well go without during the long summer holidays.

This is a problem that affects him powerfully – he knows what it is like to go hungry as a child.

To have a mum who, however hard she works, finds it difficult to feed her kids.
To be so grateful for school dinners.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Perhaps saints are people whose eyes are open to the painful stuff, the sad stuff, the difficult stuff in the world.

Who know from experience what it is like to suffer.

So they are sensitive to the suffering in others.

And are willing to name the problem out loud.

Saints don't need to be superheroes.

With superpowers.

They need to be people who don't shut their eyes to the problems all around.

People who choose not to live in denial.

The second thing that Marcus Rashford does is to believe that he can make a difference.

He doesn't wallow in learned helplessness.

Nor does he think there is nothing he can do so he might as well spend his enormous footballer's salary on enjoying himself.

He chooses to get engaged.

Back before the summer holidays, when he first raised the issue of free school meals, the government initially said there was nothing they could do.

But Rashford's publicity campaign got them to change their minds.

Over the summer, families who were eligible for free school meals had £15 of food vouchers a week.

His October campaign to have the scheme extended over the half term holiday and through to next Easter has not been successful with the government.

So far.

But his petition has over a million signatures.

And popular opinion has shown very clearly what it thinks of MPs who take a pay rise, eat subsidised meals in the House of Commons canteen, and vote against food for hungry children.

Government U-turns seem to be a bit of a thing this weekend.

Perhaps they will change their minds about this too.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Perhaps Saints are people who have a go.

Who don't just lament the problems they see around them.

But who believe that they can make a difference in this world.

It may not be a national campaign.

It may be organising shopping for those who are shielding in Hitchin.

It may be picking up the phone once a week to make sure that someone who is isolated hears a human voice.

But saints know that a journey of a thousand miles begin with a single step.

And so they put their shoes on and set off.

The third thing that Marcus Rashford does is inspire other people.

His October campaign hasn't changed the governments' mind.

Yet.

But within an hour or so of the vote in Parliament last week, El Bar de Tapas in Stevenage had posted an offer on Twitter and Facebook.

Any families who needed food for their children over half term should get in touch.

They would be happy to help.

This proved to be the beginning of a wave of offers across the country.

Small independent cafes, and large restaurant chains.

Individual neighbourhood cooks and local authorities.

Inspired by Marcus Rashford, the spirit of those early days of lockdown was resurrected.

Blown away by the kindness from these companies.

Rashford tweeted last weekend.

Selflessness, kindness, togetherness – this is the England I know.

Perhaps Saints are people who appeal to our better nature.

Who help us believe that we can be holier people than we ever thought.

Who inspire us to be the people God calls us to be.

When people started criticising MPs for their vote last week, and posting robust online comments about their hypocrisy, Marcus Rashford urged his 3.7 million Twitter followers not to send abuse to MPs and their families.

Believe me, he tweeted, as a Premier League player I know all too well what that feels like, and it's unnecessary.

He called for collaboration and togetherness.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

So that's why I would beatify Marcus Rashford.

Because for me he models what it's like to be a saint.

To be blessed.

To live out of kingdom values.

A saint is in tune with the painful reality of life in this world, but doesn't shut their eyes to it.

A saint is willing to do something – anything – to try to change the world.

A saint inspires others to do better – to be better.

What saints do you know?

Or – perhaps – are you a bit of a saint yourself?

Amen.

MUSIC (StF 746)

For all the saints who've shown your love
in how they live and where they move,
for mindful women, caring men,
accept our gratitude again.

For all the saints who loved your name,
whose faith increased the Saviour's fame,
who sang your songs and shared your word,
accept our gratitude, good Lord.

For all the saints who named your will,
and showed the kingdom coming still
through selfless protest, prayer, and praise,
accept the gratitude we raise.

Bless all whose will or name or love
reflects the grace of heave above.
Though unacclaimed by earthly powers,
your life through theirs has hallowed ours.

John L Bell and Graham Maule

Prayers for ourselves and others

Saints are people.

They are people who show us something of God.

They may have lived a couple of millennia ago.

They may still be alive.

But in them we can see something of what it means to live the life of faith.

My favourite saints are not perfect.

They are real people who have struggled with the same things I struggle with.

Asked the same questions I ask.

Shared the same doubts that wake me up at two in the morning.

But they have helped me to believe that God is in all of our vulnerabilities.

All of our questions.

All of our doubts.

And that I can keep on with this pilgrimage.

So before we pray, I invite you to take a moment to think of a Saint.

Who has inspired and encouraged and nudged you onwards?

Someone famous for their holiness?

Or someone ordinary and humble, but who has been really special in your own life?

You might like to put the name of your saint in the You Tube chat.

You might prefer to keep it private.

Reflective music for about a minute...

If you have made a Celtic knot from the template on our website, now is the time to use it.

If you haven't, just grab a sheet of paper.

Or make this prayer in your imagination.

In the centre of the knot, write the name of your saint.

In the circle around the centre, write some of the reasons why this saint is special to you.

What have you learned from them about being a Christian?

What qualities do they have that you would like more of in your own life?

Where can you see God in the way they live?

In the three loops, write the names of some people who might need the help of this saint today.

As you hold these people in prayer, you might like to colour in the Celtic Knot.

Or you might like to sit quietly and hold them in the light of God's love.

Imagine your saint sitting beside them.

Perhaps putting an arm around their shoulder – we can do that in our imagination, if not in real life at the moment!

What might they say to them?

What encouragement might they offer?

What hope might they share?

Reflective music for 2-3 minutes...

Holy God,

We thank you for the saints who have encouraged us on our journey.

Remind us that we too are saints.

Who have we encouraged today?

Who will we accompany tomorrow?

Be with your saints across all of time and space,

As we travel together

In the light of your love.

Amen.

Lord's prayer

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come,

your will be done,

on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins

as we forgive those who sin against us.

Lead us not into temptation

but deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours

now and for ever. Amen.

Blessing

Grace, mercy and peace,
from the God of all ages,
the saviour of all peoples
and the source of all goodness,
be with us all, and all God's saints,
now and evermore.

Amen.

MUSIC

May the road rise up to meet you.
May the wind be always at your back.
May the sun shine warm upon your face;
the rains fall soft upon your fields;
and until we meet again,
may God hold you in the palm of His hand.

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