

**1 November 2020**  
**All Saints with All Souls**

We all live by stories throughout our lives. Stories help shape our way of life, the rules we live by and our ability to understand the world, its purpose and our meaning within the cosmos of all that exists. The stories we learn as we grow from child to adulthood are of many different types. One of my favourite stories is Winnie the Pooh. I have no doubt that the stories most of us have grown up with may not be the same as for the present generations of X's and Y's.

As we gather on this All Saints day let me ask you the following questions. What story or stories are given prominence in your life? What consequences have they had on your sense of identity, purpose, and relationships? Have they from time to time caused you doubt or troubled you in what you have witnessed throughout your life. I am aware that many people lost their Christian faith following both World War 1 and 2. They abandoned their faith story on account of their war experience. I find myself troubled by my faith when I witness particularly the abuse of children and lose confidence in how a good God could allow such incidents, and of course there are many other examples I could give. I sometimes, in reflecting on events and incidents that defy explanation search for an answer that reflects the unconditional love of God and find it wanting. It has meant for me that when I cannot help or find a solution, I hand the matter to God. I also understand that when suffering occurs, many times on account of humanity's inhumanity to itself or due to natural phenomena and other unexplainables, God stands in the midst.

Throughout Christian history there have been countless men and women who have understood God in many different ways and whose earlier stories have changed throughout their lives, from the hermits and mystics, poets, religious, musicians, actors, to the religious leaders of various generations. Each, as I have read their stories, are different in their expression and lifestyles. Some live silently in prayer, others go out to the mission fields, others write music to express their understanding of God, some teach, heal and serve communities in different ways. Some have fought in wars and overpowered native people exploiting their natural resources and destroying their beliefs and way of life all in the name of the Christian God believing they were acting in God's name. Others ruffle the feathers of those who seek to protect the faith from corruption and distortion. Some we know as a result have been excommunicated.

I began my faith journey, the story that frames my life today out of curiosity and found to my surprise that I even liked Church, the colour, the music, the smoke and the fellowship. My senses were stimulated and the mystery that surrounds the experience has stayed with me. In the parish I grew up in on some occasions on great feast days one could not see the sanctuary due to the level and intensity of incense. From this date my story of faith and its impact on my life has remained although much different and sometimes I suspect challenging to some.

At the centre of the celebration of All Saints is community, a common story and our connectedness to each other. The story of All Saints embraces the life stories of countless unknown saints of God who I have no doubt were of many shapes, sizes, and outlooks and theologies. Some may have acted in ways that we would think today a little odd or even outrageous, even heretical in the minds of some, but they all were committed to the faithfulness of God as they experienced the divine presence in their lives or around them. All Saints is an occasion to recall those special in our own faith journey. It is a great occasion to remember the faithful people of God, not just those who have celebrity status such as Peter, Paul, George, Mary or John but rather the unknown and the often neglected. They remind us of our connectedness to a great company of God's people throughout generations and their stories and life witness provide a context and mission imperative for our own journey of faith.

Today's celebration of All Saints with All Souls in such a consumer and present day orientated society, eager so often to forget the past, one that does not any longer study history, relegates faith to the status of myth, yet is now busy promoting Halloween. If you do not believe me, you have not shopped in the supermarkets for the past few weeks. Now do not miss understand I am not a "party Pooper", but I wonder why we need Halloween when in fact its origins and purpose are not understood.

The theme of community, the Feast of All Saints, embraces the past, present and future and provides a focus for us here at this time, as we ponder and reflect upon our own individual and parish journey. We are reminded that as a fellowship of believers we are not a "Johnny come lately" event but a movement a radical movement that began at the time of God breathing life as we know it today into the creation. We are reminded that from love we come and to love we return. It is a time for Shalom, peace and hope, ultimately fulfilled when God gathers the righteous to a high mountain where all suffering is banished. For the Christian Jesus is the fulfillment of this hope, heaven on earth and beyond, when we return to the love that created us. Surely this feast day has more substance and meaning for the future, for our children than Halloween?

In the passage from the book of Revelation we heard this morning is the promise of God's salvation and redemptive act in Jesus. Though they are themselves people who have suffered, the saints take delight not in what they have achieved but rather in God to whom their salvation belongs. The community of saints is diverse. Its members are drawn from every nation, people and language and yet they speak a common word. They share a common song. All Saints then is a celebration of life, not death, of a future not oblivion.

Our Gospel reading describes the focus of God's blessing, and we are reminded that it is the poor in spirit, the meek, the hungry, those who seek after justice, the merciful, the peace maker and the persecuted who get the "Guernsey or Jumper", or as one commentator on the passage says, "the apple of God's eye", or "God's preference for blessing".

Jesus does not ascend the mountain, to escape the crowd, nor should we try to identify a real mountain somewhere in Galilee, as the gesture is symbolic. Nor should we suppose that Jesus delivered all these sayings at the same time. They are probably a collection of sayings. In the biblical tradition the mountains are places of revelation. Jesus ascent of the mountain evokes Moses ascending Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah and with unparalleled authority that belongs to him as God's son, he now imparts a new sermon and interpretation of the sacred text.

Sadly, and accompanied by much suffering and exploitation these promise and blessings have been misused both inside and outside the Church to justify the exploitation of the poor and calling on them to accept their lot as their reward will be in heaven. This is both a false and simplistic reading of the text.

They are promises that are to have a profound affect now as in the future on each and every one of us. As we heard this morning from Matthew's Gospel Jesus speaks not only with authority but also with a radical ethic for living. This is an ethic that has serious implications for all who call themselves believers and followers of Christ. The requirements stand in contrast to worldly values and expectations. They are the demands for a just and ethical society for today. To be gentle, to mourn, to thirst for what is right, to be merciful, pure in heart and a peacemaker is to show in our own lives the presence of God and signs of his kingdom. We are all diminished and our own redemption at risk when we fail to hear the cries of the poor and disposed for justice.

In a letter I wrote to the Age a few months ago, I asked the question where is our moral compass for today? I was reflecting at the time on statements from politicians and other leaders in our community who claim to be Christian, enacting and supporting policies that will impact on those least able to bear the brunt while ignoring the failures of the powerful. Compassion and justice ignored at the expense of political expediency and economics. Children used as pawns to stop those who seek to enter Australia from ravaged torn nations. One cannot be surprised that many young people struggle to connect with the political system and models of leadership at the highest level in disarray.

Most of us throughout our life will have times of struggle, hurt, failure and disappointment. Very few of us will escape such experiences. The saints we recall today experienced such times. They stood alongside those who were voiceless and powerless and likewise we are called to do the same at this time of anxiety and confusion in many aspects of our common life.

Although not clear or spoken about saints are not perfect. Like you and me they have their Achilles heels and are not without sin, yet they remain faithful and committed to God, recognizing their own brokenness, yet confident in God's ongoing presence and love in their own lives.

There is much for all of us to ponder and reflect upon today as we all struggle with the issues of the day that affect who we are as people and our relationship to God.

May our story of Christian faith sustain and guide us all at this time.

Amen