Sermon – Patronal Festival All Saints 27th October 2022

**Let us pray:**

Lord of all:

As we celebrate our church this day and all the Saints after whom this church is dedicated,

may will be filled with all joy in believing,

in this world and the next,

so that we may come at last to that unity of love and Spirit in which all our souls may dwell,

through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Today is a day of contrasts. This morning, we celebrate with joy our Patronal Festival, All Saints Day; yet by this afternoon, joy will have turned at least into reflection, if not into sorrow, as we remember the Souls of those we love yet see long longer. Thankfulness, I pray, will unite both services.

Built for the less exalted people of this town – than those who found themselves welcome up the hill – All Saints is aptly named. For our dedication covers all those Saints for whom space has not been found in the lectionary calendar. All Saints celebrates the overlooked amongst the faithful giants of past ages. The season of Remembrance begins then not this afternoon with All Souls, but this morning, as we find space in the worship of our lives to recall the forgotten heroes of our faith. Inevitably we don’t know their names but that is the point of remembering them.

The impact of such modest origins to our church continues to infuse our life here, for I genuinely believe that there is an inherited humility built into our identity at All Saints that makes us naturally welcoming and inclusive. We are pleased to see new faces with no expectation that you come other than as you are.

I’ve been enjoying reading some of our old monthly parish magazines this week. As happens frequently today the editorial of these magazine was produced nationally and then sold on to churches for them to wrap around their own news. Much of the flavour of church life can be gleaned from reading between the lines of the reports. I love the euphemism of the English language. What does the following sentence from the report of the 1985 Dedication Festival truly mean:

*‘The ’Heavens are Telling’, always a trying piece of music, was admirably rendered.’*

Reduced to what I am tempted to ask.

At random I picked out the magazines for 1900 but there was no report of the 26th Dedication Festival held on All Saints Day that year. Instead, readers enjoyed very detailed reports of the Sunday School Concert and the annual Sale of Work, both of which were accompanied by equally detailed accounts. Our interest in the financials of church life is nothing new.

By 1946, All Saints was in its heyday and I can’t do better than to read to you the full report of the Patronal Festival….

Reminiscing is great fun. But there is also a much more serious point to it as well.

In recalling where we have come from as a church, we can appreciate the importance of what it is that we do today – however small and weak a community we might feel ourselves to be.

In gathering regularly in church together, we represent the continuity of our faith. We might feel a little like the remnant of the people of Israel in exile but we need to remember that their exile ended as indeed so shall ours – though probably not for any of us to witness.

Our task, for now, for our lifetimes, is to be faithful.

Which begs the question, faithful to what?

There are lots of possible answers to that – to the church, to this church, to our families, to our community, to one another.

The most important answer though, unites all of these: faithful to God.

And at the heart of our faithfulness must be our love of God, our desire for God – as the psalmist says:

*One thing I ask from the Lord,*

 *this only do I seek:*

*that I may dwell in the house of the Lord*

 *all the days of my life,*

*to gaze on the beauty of the Lord*

 *and to seek him in his temple.*

There is much to divert us from this task.

I never used to believe in the real presence of evil until I experienced it. At that moment – which I remember very clearly though the details are irrelevant – I was presented with a choice. And I rejected evil. I was immensely spiritually strengthened as a result.

There is a lot of evil in this world that has nothing to do with violence and hatred. Evil permeates into church life in very subtle ways, ways that we would not recognise as evil but whose impact is no less sinister. And some of the most earnest and dedicated Christians within the life of the church are prey to it, including me.

As an example, earlier this week I was at a clergy meeting – they are called Chapters which make us sound like Hells Angels or Freemasons, I’m not sure which – and we were discussing – aren’t we always? – the future ministry of the church. I found myself, unhelpfully for others I’m sure, moaning yet again about the dire state of things and the lack of time I have for priestly ministry due to the onerous and invasive nature of church management.

I’m not sure such moaning is always very faithful, however understandable. The tectonic plates that will determine the future of all of our churches are much too powerful to be re-set at this level. I – and you – would be better spending our limited energies on our core tasks, the chief of which, is surely to care for the spiritual lives of the community amongst whom we live.

Very soon – 2024 I believe – we celebrate our 150th anniversary. That’s nothing in the life of Christendom of course, but it is a reason to celebrate the presence of this church in this community. It calls for a festival, for a party, for the completion of some of the works we wish to undertake around the church. But above all, it calls for a re-statement of what it means to be a Christian in the community today: faithful in prayer; dedicated in service; committed to the place of faith in the world.

As I set about my daily tasks, I find it helps to have a target or two. Perhaps our forthcoming major anniversary, might just be one such target to help focus our hearts and minds, on a future that is certain if we have the faith to live it.

Amen.