

The Feast of the Splendid Nobodies

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All Saints – Rev 7 9-17, Ps 149 1-5, Eph 1 11-23, Lk 6 20-31.

All Saints' is the day when we celebrate the many, very special followers of Jesus who aren't recognised by name in the Church's calendar of important somebodies. So the writer Elizabeth Johnson calls today *the feast of the splendid nobodies*. All followers of Jesus are called to number among the saints. But what's that mean?

I'm glad Elizabeth Johnson acknowledges her nobodies as splendid. That's the job description of followers of Jesus. Our call is to be splendidly different. And as we just heard, Jesus doesn't mean a little bit different. *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,* ²⁸ *bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.* ²⁹ *If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat don't withhold even your shirt.* ³⁰ *Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, don't ask for them again.* ³¹ *Do to others as you would have them do to you.* We're called to be very different people from the people we might have been if we'd never become followers of Jesus.

We've been getting some very confronting challenges from Jesus lately. Last week, we heard him say *it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God.* That challenges most of us. And this week, we're told to love our enemies, turn the other cheek and give to those who've stolen from us. Is that what all the saints have always done? Is this really what we signed up for

when we became official followers of Jesus? We members of modern westernised churches are not at all comfortable about this radical aspect of our call to discipleship. I'm not. But Jesus did it all. Did we really sign up for this? Let's check the terms and conditions set out in our baptismal charge: *Go forth into the world; be of good courage; hold fast that which is good; render to no one evil for evil; strengthen the faint hearted; support the weak; help the afflicted; give honour to all.* That *sounds* do-able; well most of the time anyway.

But after what we just heard Jesus say, this charge from our baptismal blessing sounds a bit tame. Will being of good courage and all those other things make my life reveal the Kingdom of God to people who don't know Jesus? I doubt it. For someone like me, it just sounds like a call to be decent. For a poor person, it sounds like a recipe to feel inadequate. The baptismal charge doesn't confront everyone like Jesus' call does. It's not as inescapably direct or specific as Jesus' call we just heard in the Gospel. It doesn't demand the radical actions Jesus calls from us; his demand that we become completely different people from your average citizen.

Today, we celebrate all the people who *have* answered his call; people whose lives *have* revealed the Kingdom of God to the world. And they've done so at great personal cost. The price they've paid is the reason our invitation to confession and our collect prayer today refer to the *cloud of witnesses* surrounding us.

These witnesses are the people who, down the centuries, have put their lives on the line for their commitment to Jesus. We know this because in the Bible, the Greek word translated as 'witnesses' is also the word we translate as 'martyrs;' – people who've died for their faith. The cloud of witnesses are those who truly *have* put their lives on the line for Jesus. And they're still doing it. The past century has seen more followers of Jesus killed rather than renounce their faith than in any previous century. Where does the astounding

strength of their commitment come from?

It's fairly clear how it happened in the church of the 3rd century. Back then, preparation for baptism took at least three years. The aim of this preparation was to irreversibly change the habits of perception and standards of judgment of people who were coming out of a pagan lifestyle. They had to make the commandments of Jesus the heart of their way of life. An important early Christian book, the *Didache*, emphasised living the teaching of Jesus! You weren't just to talk about it; you had to learn to live it. The Church's primary witness was not what Christians said, but what they did. And an important focus of the *Didache* was the command of Jesus we just heard this morning; *bless those who curse you, and pray for your enemies.*

Another significant early Church document was called the *Apostolic Tradition*. And like the *Didache*, it made reconciliation with an alienated sister or brother a precondition of community participation; no polite concealment of grudges. According to the *Apostolic Tradition*, our inner life and outer life had to be truly integrated for participation in community life to be allowed. The Church would not baptize someone in the hope that they might change for the better afterwards.

This is so far removed from the way people expect to receive baptism here today. I worked with two Chinese priests some time ago. When preparing people for baptism, they gave them months and sometimes years of regular classes until the candidates were deemed ready to receive baptism. The intention of this long and thorough process is, like the early Church process, to shape a new character in the candidate; to change their character from one formed by the world around us to a new character formed by the teachings of Jesus. This is not a cult thing; it's forming people whose actions proclaim the Kingdom of God to the world.

How might that work for us here? I think it's best to talk about us as a community rather than focus on individual actions. Inner city churches are challenged by the growing number of homeless people turning up on our doorsteps, and us not being able to do much for them in a practical way. There's always the worry about protecting property, insurance issues, setting up dependencies if we do this or that. As a community, how might we better obey the commands we have received from today's Gospel? They are clear and unambiguous. How might we as a community of saints respond to the needs that literally arrive on our doorstep right now?

e.g Budget to give at least 10% of our parish income to mission / clear need / outreach?

Develop a clear agreed purpose as a parish: acknowledging that we are not here for ourselves, but to be a community whose character is formed by the clear teachings of Jesus in Luke 6, and which can respond instinctively without delay to obey Christ's clear call on our gifts and resources for those who need them. Amen