

We are free to be sanctified; to be nurtured as saints.

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All Saints Year A – Matt 5.1-12, Ps 34.1-10, 22, Rev 7.9-17

In 1974, Michael Leunig published a delightful cartoon that's always stuck in my memory. A parishioner seeks pastoral counsel from their priest, saying *"I'm confused. One minute I'm up, the next minute I'm down."* The priest replies, *"Then you must pray to the patron saint of ups and downs."* The next picture shows the parishioner kneeling before an icon of St Francis of a See-saw.

Popular culture says a saint is a really good person. The Roman church says saints are people whose holiness and miraculous powers have been researched and verified by the proper authorities. Saints also seem to specialise. We once went to a church named for St Jude – patron saint of lost causes and hopeless cases. Great for finding lost keys! And angels and archangels get the gong too – St Michael and all Angels?! So the bar gets set higher and higher; they're a rarefied breed, these saints.

But as it happens, no such qualifications are mentioned in today's readings. And looking around the New Testament, throughout the book of Acts and Paul's letters, *'saint'* is mostly another word for anyone who belongs to Jesus; a Christian. That makes you and me saints – all of us. How does that feel?

Today's readings identify saints differently from the way we tend to. In these passages, saints are ordinary, vulnerable people. They're courageous, but they're no super-heroes. When difficult things happen to them, what gets revealed is their dependence on God. In the case of Matthew's community, this

had a lot to do with the persecution they endured. You see that in the beatitudes we read just now; particularly the last two. ¹⁰ *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* ¹¹ *Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.*

Did you notice that the persecuted receive the same promise as the *poor in spirit* – *theirs is the kingdom of heaven*? That expression *poor in spirit* has had an amazing amount of ink spilled about it. The best definition I've found so far is this. They are *those who, in regard to their inner lives, stand before God as beggars ... with the feeling of their inability to help themselves.* ^{Luz, Matthew I, p.191} Is that a familiar feeling? Are you encouraged? Because Matthew remembers this saying as Jesus addressing saints. *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

In our study group on Tuesday, we talked about the meaning of *blessed* at the beginning of each verse. It's a word that doesn't get used much in conversation. So we looked for a more common word.

Some translations use the word *happy*. Our Psalm does that in the second half of v. 8, *happy are they that hide in [the Lord]*, translating the Hebrew word for *blessed* בְּרָכָה (Gk μακάριος) as happy. But *happy* is too mundane to carry the weight of this idea. In Matthew and in Revelation this morning, we've been told that even in the face of the most terrible persecution, you can have both a confidence in God's love for you right now, and a joyful trust that, no matter what, God's blessing will be fully revealed. ^{Rev 7.16} *They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; ... and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.* ^{Matt 5.12} *Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.*

All that in one word. It's a tall order, and *happy* just doesn't cut it. The suffering being described is not the sort of experience a comfortable Australian is likely to bump into. Yet that's what faith looks like in the world's many war zones right now. The same goes for Australian Aboriginal communities, where life is filled with all-too-frequent hospital visits, and far too many, and too early funerals. The Gospel passage we've heard this morning will have been read out in the churches of Papunya and Santa Teresa and many other remote communities. These verses will speak to these fellow saints with an immediacy and reality that many of us can scarcely imagine. These people know God's will to bless. And knowing that means they can name the wrongs they suffer, and call out in hope for God's blessing now.

So, *saint* is a much bigger idea than just a good person. To be a saint, you don't have to meet any other requirement than needing God's grace. You don't need to cultivate a confident faith; that's God's gift too. And if you think yours isn't good enough, Jesus says *yours is the kingdom of heaven*. If you're in mourning, he says you'll be comforted, whether you can accept that now or not. And the meek? Meek doesn't mean laying yourself out as a doormat; it just means gentle; not self-righteous. So God speed your inheritance; earth needs you!

All the promises Jesus makes in today's Gospel are for the here and now, as well as for the other side. And this can support us in choosing a state of mind that Jesus calls righteousness. This righteousness is best understood as generosity. It's a state of mind where you're free to live generously, confident of God's blessing. This righteousness has space for generous passion; passion for justice, for kindness, for peace, for growing in a purity of heart which finds Jesus in the downtrodden, the lost and the burdened – like Jesus did. We are free to be sanctified; to be nurtured as saints. And in turn, we are free to set free. Thanks be to

God! Amen.