

## All Saints' Day

(Apocalypse 7:2-4,9-14 / Matthew 5:1-12)

01.11.2014

Following a customary practice in many monasteries here at Holy Cross we read an extract from the Roman Martyrology each evening. This gives us a short biography of the saints the Church commemorates for the following day.

I find it striking that we end of our reading of the listed saints with this line: *And elsewhere* (that is throughout the Christian world) *a great multitude of saints that no one can count from every tribe, tongue, people and nation.*

It is all the saints of this last category, the unnamed, the unknown, the low-profile, the no-known-profile saints, whom we celebrate today. They are as much saints in glory as the numerous holy men, women and children who are listed in our Churches' Martyrologies as models of sanctity.

We have all known such saints in our family circles, neighbourhoods, parishes, workplaces, communities of Christian life, monasteries, convents etc.

These men, women and children will never have their cause for canonisation introduced in Rome, but they are among God's saints in heaven.

These people are as much models for us to imitate as those officially canonised.

Friends of God, they are also our friends, for it is the nature of the friends of God to be friendly in regard to others. From their friendship we can draw strength and encouragement for our daily living.

It is important for us to remember the stories of those we have known, to treasure in our hearts things about them, to recognise where and how they have marked and influenced our lives for the good.

I would say that just as it is beneficial for monastic communities who listen to the short biographies of the Church's recognised saints when they hear the Martyrology proclaimed, so too it is important for all of us to hear a little something of the stories of the lesser known, largely unknown, saints to be found in that anonymous throng today's first Scripture reading refers to.

We can share with others the stories of those we have known who have marked us for the good and we can listen to other people as they share with us the story of those whose everyday life sanctity impressed and inspired them.

This morning, what I propose to do is to begin by sharing with you the story of someone I heard about in recent months.

I never met this person, but from the stories I have heard I feel as if I know her.

I find it striking that I should have heard about this woman from two different sources within weeks of each other.

On the 19th of August last we had some guests join us for lunch to mark an important wedding anniversary in their life. Conversation came around to how they had met. The wife was a teacher in her working years and she explained that it was when she came to teach not far from where her future husband lived that she met him. The story went on: one thing led to another and eventually they were led to the altar rails together to exchange their marriage vows.

But before this came about, the then young woman had taught in Belfast. In our conversation, she spoke of her teaching days there. She elaborated about her first school experience as a young teacher. She spoke with great love, respect and reverence about the woman who had been her first principal in the primary school in West Belfast. She said of this woman something I often heard my late mother say of people (not necessarily altar rail people, by the way): *she was a real saint.*

(As I speak those words I can hear my late mother say over and over again, up until just before she

died, when she would speak of two old ladies we knew who lived together for years and were the incarnation of generosity for so many people around them, despite their own financial poverty: *They were two old saints.*)

The head-mistress our guest spoke of was a totally committed Catholic primary school teacher. She had never married. For years had looked after her parents as well as teaching in school. In some ways we might think of her as the typical spinster teacher of a by-gone era. But this spinster head-mistress stood out by the way she showed great interest in the on-going romances of the young teachers on her staff, rejoicing in their joy to find love in their lives and encouraging them to follow their heart's desire.

The person who described this head-mistress to me told me that she only ever saw her wear two costumes which she would alternate and keep well. This led into the really striking thing in the story for me about this lady, Ms Healy: her great generosity. You see, the school children who came to her school were by and large from deprived backgrounds. Many of their parents could not afford to buy them decent shoes or supply their uniforms. Some had little nourishing food to eat in their packed lunches, if they weren't getting free dinners. Ms Healy provided for them all out of her own limited resources. She gave away what she earned as quickly as she earned it, often leaving herself in need. The only thing Ms Healy ever offered herself in the course of the year was a five-day pilgrimage to Lourdes where she went out as a voluntary helper. Her vice-principal who knew the kind of person she was (and maybe regarded her as a danger to herself for this reason) started to hold back some pounds from Ms Healy's wage each time she received her pay-packet so that there would be something to pay for the travel expenses to Lourdes at the end of the school year.

I was moved when I heard the story of this woman who sounded to me to have been, to be, *a real saint.*

Can you imagine my surprise when just over a month later someone else spoke to me of Ms Healy? This happened when I was on retreat in the West of Ireland.

This person who spoke to me of Ms Healy never mentioned her former teacher's name and she had no notion that I might know who she was talking about when she described to me how as she prayed at Eucharist one morning in a church which was right beside where this Ms Healy lived, she sensed that her former teacher was living her passover into God's presence at that very hour. It transpired that she was. She died as Mass was being celebrated in her parish church.

I could not help but ask if this woman's name, Ms Healy. It was.

Ms Healy died as she had lived: poor. Because she had been so generous in her lifetime she had nothing too leave behind to others. All was already given. I am sure she was immediately escorted to that rich banquet prepared for her and all the generous of heart in heaven.

The person who told me the story of her premonition of her former teacher's death, was a bit taken aback that I should know anything about her since she knew I had never met her.

But, as I said, since the 19th of August of this year, I feel I do know this woman.

I feel I know her because other people have told me the story of this *ancestor in the faith.*

We read this exhortation in the Book of Maccabees: *Remember the story of your ancestors in the faith.*

The stories of lives of the saints are told to us to encourage and strengthen us on our own life journey.

I could leave things there, but I just want to say something about just one aspect of sanctity which was so evidently and so beautifully exemplified in Ms Healy's life: generosity, generous love.

In the Jewish and Christian traditions emphasis is laid upon the importance of spontaneous generosity in the lives of the just.

Spontaneous generosity is generosity which comes not from obligation, but from love overflowing from one's heart. (The Torah already distinguishes between obligatory generosity and spontaneous generosity.)

Spontaneous generosity, free generous love, is not at all calculated. It is self-gift which awaits no return. It is rooted in and stems from God's love.

Spontaneous generosity, true charitable love (the sort God's saints display), volunteers itself, even before any request is made of it. It comes from the giver's inner depths, their deepest being, what the French call *le coeur profond*, *the heart of one's heart*, we might say.

It is total self-gift.

It is not just the giving of something that belongs to the giver: their material goods, their wealth, or whatever.

It is total self-gift because God is the model of the giver's generosity.

In Christ-Jesus we see God's love to be total self-gift. In giving His Only Begotten Son, God gave Himself!

We could say that it is God's nature to be a giver. He is intrinsically a giver.

God not only bestows gifts upon us. God always gives Himself. He gives His whole being. He gives His inner self.

*Made in God's image and likeness*, we are called to be givers. We are called not just to give our material wealth, but our very selves.

If we live in full communion with God we can and we will arrive at the point where we give our whole being, holding nothing back.

But, evidently, it takes us time to get arrive at this point.

We have first to undergo a long healing, life-restoring, process.

You see, because of what we call *original sin*, all of us have been wounded and these wounds, like all suffering, are inclined to make us somewhat self-centred. They throw us into fear and we take refuge in hiding. Often it is for no other reason than our fear and shame to come out of the place where we are hiding that holds us back from daring to generously share ourselves with others.

And so it is that we have to be led by God's grace first to recover who and what we truly are to be able to give ourselves to others.

This requires of us that we dare to leave aside so much of what we cling to, which is not truly who and what we are.

The human heart that is true to itself is one which is in accord with God's heart.

Such a heart is naturally giving; it is genuinely caring and considerate; it is a tender heart; it is a heart of flesh, one easily moved to show compassion; it is a heart ever ready to give; always prompt to offer merciful forgiveness.

Experience shows us how our wounded hearts can sometimes be slow in respect to the attitudes I have outlined.

Our hearts can be loathe to give, they can hold back what they contain, they can retract even when they feel called to give, they can be sluggish and they can even harden at times.

Put simply, our hearts can become clogged, stopped up.

We have seen that one of the principle reasons for this is fear.

A paralysing aspect of our fear for ourselves can be an unfounded concern that if we give of ourselves we will lose ourselves. This is simply not true. The Scriptures and the great spiritual tradition teach otherwise. When we give, what happens, in fact, is the contrary to losing: for, *it is in giving that we receive*.

Yes, by daring to give of ourselves more generously, we receive ourselves more fully.

We become more and more our true self because we become more and more like God.

*God is love.*

When we live in the likeness of God we are love. We are spontaneous, generous love, limitless love.

When we are like God we arrive at that *perfect love which casts out all fear*, including that fear that so often haunts us (born usually of unfortunate, hurtful, experiences in our past): the fear that our self-giving love will be spurned and rejected.

Even if our love is sometimes spurned and rejected (and this happens) we must dare to do as God does: we must dare to remain loving and self-giving, even in regard to those who have refused and rejected us, or failed to recognise our generous love in their regard.

We can fear that if we continue to give generously we might leave ourselves totally impoverished to the point of destitution. This fear can make us pull back and become stingy, if we are not careful.

We must be vigilant not to allow this fear to grip us, for stingy people become sad people. There is joy to be found in giving!

With God, with all true love, there is no place for stinginess. There is only superabundance of gift, no matter how ungrateful for, or un-recognising of, God's generosity the recipient is.

A true lover will always feel he or she can never give enough to their loved one.

True lovers always want to give more and more of themselves.

Today we thank God for such people (real saints, true lovers) who have graced our lives. In saying that, I think, at one and the same time, of those who live now in the communion of the saints in glory and those who continue to journey alongside us in the communion of saints we enjoy here on earth.

Amen!