

You too are a saint!

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Scriptures: Isaiah 25:6-9; Revelation 21:1-6; John 11:32-44

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Good morning! It's lovely to see you all again, even if I am half asleep! Thank you for your kindness and the love shown to us, little Hazel is a huge blessing, and we've been so blessed by all the clothes and gifts we have received!

Well, today is **All Saints Day**, a day we properly celebrate on 1st November. But we decided to jump it to Sunday!

Now, I have a question for you. A cowgirl. A crayon. Tinkerbell. Snow White. Cruella d' Ville. Mary Poppins. A grandmother. And a rat. What do all these have in common?

Well the answer is they were all costumes that Angela my wife wore when she was a little girl at Halloween! I understand some of them, but a crayon?! Really?

In her part of America, **Halloween** – which is the day before **All Saints Day** – is a funny festival where children dress up in cute outfits and get treats from their neighbours. It's altogether quite wholesome.

But for me, growing up, **Halloween was a nastier event** – when elderly folk kept away from the door and kept lights low in fear of who might knock on their door unwantedly. And maybe it's just my experience, but it seems that not many people in Britain dress up as Snow White, as they instead choose ghosts, monsters and images of disturbed killers from popular films. And here we have the contrast: two days, Halloween and All Saints, back-to-back. **At its worst, one points to darkness. The other reminds us of who we are.**

Some ministers I know in London also feel that **Halloween is getting darker**. Hollywood always releases some movie about murder or dark forces to scare people at Halloween. I remember when I was in Russia being invited to the cinema to watch a movie about ghosts which had objects moving mysteriously around, and when I got home – alone in my flat – I went into the kitchen, and then a saucepan lid slipped and fell, and I jumped out of my skin!

Hear me clearly - I'm not saying don't have harmless fun on Halloween. I'm not saying don't dress up as a crayon! But I am calling us to be **wise**, to **discern** our culture and actions, and to think **in which direction we are pointing other people**. To life and light, or darkness?

Because for many, Halloween is not a bit of fun. I checked some news stories this week: in the UK, police forces have to increase their presence because there is always a spike in crime on Halloween. The reality is that dark forces exist, and they want to exploit us.

Whether we realise or not, we are all in a conflict all the time. We constantly face **two choices: the way of God or the way of rebellion**. And rebellion leads to dark things, to

addiction and strife. We are in a constant battle to control our minds and what we give our thoughts and time to.

Some people get super interested in murders and true crime. They give their imagination to these things. But that can lead to an unhealthy fascination with how the murders happen, and then they imagine themselves doing the murder...and **once it's in the mind, it's not far from an action.** This week I took a look at some news headlines, and saw the following:

- "Irish teen who beat woman to death **had unhealthy interest in** macho male culture"
- "Teen killer **had worrying interest in** knives before murder"
- "Murder suspect **had unhealthy interest in** dead birds and young children"
- "Man who killed with hammer **had deep interest in** extreme violence"

These people all started with "deep interests" in the horrific things they later did. **There is a reason the Bible urges us to think about the good, to be warriors for light and truth.** The things we ponder and think about begin to own us. At heart, it's a question of idolatry: the thing we think about most will become the thing that controls us the most.

But God calls us to light, to follow Christ. This is a way that counterbalances the world's obsession with the darkness, which only produces death. But God calls us to light. This is the contrast here: Halloween at its worst is about the dark, but today we celebrate All Saints, and this is about light. So enough about Halloween! **This is All Saints!**

Last week, **Bishop Alison spoke to us and reminded us that we all have a calling from God.** "Why are we here?" she asked. "We are choosing to be agents of change in this world, to be counterbalances in a dark world. We are choosing to bring light when we choose Jesus."

Just like Jesus turned up and changed a blindman's world forever, so too do each and every one of us **have a gift and a calling to bring to this world.** Take heart, for God is calling you!

So on this All Saints Day, I want to remind us that the Bible tells us we are saints! We are a royal priesthood. We are a holy nation. "Saint" comes from the Latin Sanctus, which is the Latin for the Greek word meaning Holy. We are all made holy in Jesus!

And we stand in the shadow of the great saints of the past who have lit the way for us today. **Let us draw on their inspiration, and see how we might follow Christ in our day as they did in theirs:**

Take **Saint Francis of Assisi**, who gave up worldly wealth and lived among the poor, using his talents to help them. He broke down social walls and welcomed in lepers, living in harmony with the world around him and showing a world obsessed with power a different way of life.

Take **Saint Rosa Maria Sgorbati**, an Italian lady who became a nun and a nurse, and ministered medical care to the people of Kenya and Somalia. She was murdered in 2006 by Islamists, yet her final words were "I forgive; I forgive; I forgive."

Take **Vincent Donovan** – not an ‘official’ saint, but someone who used his life in Tanzania, working among the Masai people, finding a way to bring the good news of Jesus to them in their own culture, and changing lives as he did it.

Take **George Liele** – again, no “official saint”, but born a slave in Virginia in 1750, he worked for his freedom in Jamaica and preached the good news of Jesus and ministered to those enslaved, giving much of the money he earned from his job to those enslaved. It is said he produced some 8000 Baptist Christians in Jamaica and laid the foundation for emancipation.

There are so many incredible stories of what the saints of Jesus have done to bring God’s Kingdom into this world! But the point is, there are two ways. The way of this world, which is Halloween. At its worst, it glorifies in death, evil, wickedness while never actually confronting these things in reality. Which teenager wearing a skeleton costume has really understood or contemplated death?

The other way is God’s way. Confronting the true reality of death, and defeating it. Think of the gospel reading from today! Jesus did not hide from the horror of death. Jesus wept. He felt the emotion and the pain and agony. He saw the distress and the hopelessness. And he walked up to the grave and cried “Lazarus, come forth!”

This was no show like Halloween, where we don’t really deal with the reality of death. **This was brutal confrontation.** The results of death were everywhere. The stench of death was in the air. **Jesus confronted it. And Jesus defeated it.**

Think too of **Isaiah** foretelling a new world, where there is a feast, no more death, and disgrace is taken from us. Imagine never feeling ashamed ever again!

Think also of the vision of John in **Revelation**: a new heaven and a new earth – with God dwelling again among mortals. Death is no more, pain is no more, and all things are made new! This is an incredible vision of hope for this world, because **that new earth is our calling – we are called to help unleash God’s restoration into this world.** A world of no more death; a world where Jesus is Lord in every heart. Lazarus, come forth!

Take heart, said Bishop Alison, for **he is calling you! He calls you like he called Lazarus, out of death and into a new life, as one of his holy saints!**

But remember, it is no easy calling. St Francis lived among lepers. He suffered. Saint Rosa Maria helped suffering people all her life and was then murdered. Vincent Donovan was never rich, and George Liele was literally an enslaved man.

The way of the saints who follow Jesus is costly: it involves confronting and living with death, but they are the ones who really change this world.

As we consider the path trodden by God’s holy people in the past, let us look at our own calling to be God’s saints today. **You, each and every one of you, have a purpose.**

Each and every one of you has a gift. A calling to bring something of God's new kingdom to this old earth.

Maybe it's to help teach people how to have a strong marriage. Maybe it's helping teach and discipline children, showing them how to live and who Jesus is.

Maybe it's walking alongside the sick and dying, helping with pastoral visits, or caring in hospices. Maybe it's advocacy: speaking against racism, debt or the violence in this world.

You are a saint, chosen by Jesus. What is your mission, your calling? Which parts of this broken world will you minister to?

As you consider God's calling on your life, do feel free to ask me or Daphne for a chat in the coming weeks, and we can explore with you where God might be calling you.