

Sermon for All Saints Day at Holy Trinity Church Geneva on Sunday 2 November 2025

(Transferred from 1 November)

Texts: Daniel 7.1-3, 15-18; Ephesians 1.11-end; Luke 6.20-31

I can remember it as if it were yesterday. Standing in a church in Walthamstow in East London many years ago, joyfully singing 'Once in Royal David's city in the lead-up to Christmas. The final verse was:

*Not in that poor lowly stable,
with the oxen standing by,
we shall see Him, but in heaven,
set at God's right hand on high;
when like stars His children crowned
all in white shall wait around.*

The Vicar, who was old and very fierce, slowly ascended the pulpit to deliver his sermon. Leaning over, he glared at us, his congregation and said, "That's right – all in white, do you hear. None of your blue jeans in heaven".

From his heavy disapproval, we were left with the strong sense that in his view, most of his motley congregation, whether wearing blue jeans or not, were sinners and extremely unlikely to make it to heaven. If by any chance we did, then a radical overhaul would be needed including starting with jettisoning the hated blue jeans – symbols of the evils of this world and donning the other-worldly white garments of blessedness.

I've never forgotten these words because they made me think what does it mean to be a saint. Is it about being detached from this world and keeping pure? What characterised all the saints whom we commemorate today? And, in the light of this, what are we being asked by God to in respect of how we lead our lives?

Today we celebrate the Feast of All Saints which has been observed as a very special Feast Day in the Church's year from the 4th century. It continues to be celebrated by churches of many denominations today and in this feast, we commemorate all Christians who have fulfilled their life on earth and have now found salvation with God.

From early times, the Church has recognised certain Christians as saints because of the holiness of their lives and from the 11th century onwards, developed a formal system of canonisation of Saints. But alongside this, from the very earliest days of the church, those who were seeking to follow Christ in the first fledgling Christian communities were referred to as "saints". So today, we are celebrating both the formally recognised saints of the Church and also all those men women and young people who sought in their lifetimes to follow Christ, and we pray are now at peace with Him.

Were all the saints who have been formally recognised by the Church, free from sin and spotless? The answer is a resounding “No”. Each of the saints had their weakness and all -too human foibles from St Peter who in fear, denied Jesus, St Thomas who doubted, Wilfrid the great 7th reformer renowned for his bossiness and that great saint Theresa of Avila who railed against God, at the physical challenges she faced trying to cross Spain to renew the religious houses for which she was responsible.

Similarly we know that all those everyday saints, those men and women who in their lifetime, sought to follow Christ and in many cases did this in wonderful ways, also had their frailties and human weaknesses.

But what has characterised all these saints, whether canonised by the Church or not, has been their love of Christ and their efforts to live out their faith. To make it tangible and visible so we can smell, touch, hear, see and experience through them, something of the nature of Christ and the hope which Christ offers us.

Keeping this in mind then, what is the significance and message of All Saints Day for us?

From our Bible readings set for today there are two clear messages. The first is an urgent call for us to act as Christian disciples. The second is a message of hope. Both are profoundly interlinked.

Jesus, in his teaching we’ve just heard in St Luke’s Gospel is addressing his disciples directly in what is often called ‘The Sermon on the Plain’ (as contrasted with the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s Gospel). He is revealing to them the character of true disciples who have glimpsed his vision of the Kingdom of God and how they are being called to live out that vision prophetically in their lives. He warns them against complacency – the danger of pretending that God’s kingdom is already here and that they can therefore take their ease. And in his final words, he invites them to embrace the radical life of God’s kingdom, characterised by forgiveness, extreme generosity and seeking the wellbeing of all including and perhaps especially, those who attack us and wish us harm.

There is an urgent call for us too who would call ourselves disciples of Christ to do the same. The desire for a quiet life and a safe, comfortable, and peaceful church can tempt us to say. “All is well” and to bubble-wrap ourselves spiritually and practically against tackling the woes of the world. Yet if we do this, we deceive ourselves and we also deceive those for whom we are called to minister whether here in Geneva or further afield.

For we know the darkness of our world at this time, and through events particularly linked to the current American administration, we are seeing pain and suffering even here in comfortable Geneva. A world in which great power can be and often is abused by those who wield it. A world in which human rights and dignity are trampled on, particularly those who are already vulnerable. A world in which human life is often held cheaply. A world in which those who feel different to us in any way are portrayed as ‘The other’ - a threat to be controlled and in some cases, even eliminated.

And it's in this context that Christ's call comes to us today, clarion clear just as it did to his first disciples gathered on the plain. It's his invitation to us as his disciples to live out our faith – to give people a glimpse of what God's kingdom could look like on earth.

But to do this, it's not about keeping ourselves, pure and unsullied by the world – we have to get stuck in. and engage directly with the mess, blood and pain of the world.

I remember when I was pregnant with my first child and I was given my medical folder for my first check-up which proclaimed that I was 'under the care of Mr x, an eminent gynaecologist'. I never had even a glimpse of him throughout my pregnancy. It was only when I had given birth and there were minor complications, that he swept in, dressed in an impeccable Savile Row suit and bow tie and escorted by a crowd of junior doctors in training. Without addressing me at all, he summoned one of his junior doctors to examine me. Still without a word, he swept out and I never saw him again. I remember thinking that if this being 'under the care of' involves', I can do without it!

It is not so with being a disciple of Jesus Christ. Jesus invites us, just as he did, to roll up our sleeves and to get stuck in. We are invited to make God's love visible in tangible ways, just as Jesus accepted the touch of the bleeding woman and reached out to heal lepers and to raise those who had died, all of whom rendered him 'unclean' in eyes of the religious leaders.

What does getting stuck in as a disciple of Christ in the context of our current situation in Geneva? First of all, depending on our citizenship status either in Switzerland or France, to do we can in advocacy to bring justice and prosper welfare to those who are most vulnerable, particular the refugees, those who are migrants and whose living in situation of economic precariousness. It also involves standing and campaigning for those are considered less important and more expendable, witnessing to the truth that all human beings are made in the sight of God and are precious in his eyes.

Then getting stuck in a disciple of Christ means offering practical, economic and spiritual help to those who are most vulnerable and in most need. I believe in all this when our earthly lives drew to a close and we come into God's holy presence. He will ask us what were our wounds that we received as we stood up for and tried to help others. What were the things we shed tears for as we witnessed and campaigned against those decisions and practices which sought to diminish our fellow human beings and bring them suffering?

Our Bible readings today therefore proclaim the urgent call for us by God. to act as Christian disciples. But there is another message within them and that is a message of hope. It is hope rooted on the reality that God has already glorified Jesus through his life, death and resurrection, and the final battle against evil has been won. As St Paul proclaimed to the Ephesians, God has shown his power in raising Christ and 'has put all things under his feet and has made him head over all things' (Ephesians 1.22).

We serve as Christ's disciples with the faith and hope that God's ultimate victory over evil has already been won. But within the context of this world our calling is to show the reality of God's love and the transforming power of his kingdom by the ways in which we witness to this. If you hold the image of flickering candle in your mind, God calls us to be a candle in the world. It is held in a thick and dirty pot shrouding its light which is the reality of our world today, darkened by so much hatred, fear and greed. However, there are chinks in the pots, chinks which are created when we proclaim Christ's kingdom in our lives and it is through these tiny chinks that God's love spills forth into the world. That is what these white and gold garments which I am wearing today symbolises – flashes of light, hope and resurrection to a suffering world to which on this Feast of All Saints and every day we are called to bear witness.

Amen

Canon Daphne Green