

ALL SAINTS 2nd November 2014 7.00am Eucharist 8.00am Eucharist 9.30am Solemn Eucharist with Procession Readings: Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10, 22; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

I remember my grandfather describing his first experience of attending the Mar Thoma Church in Madras - now Chennai – in India. The liturgy began with the altar hidden from view, not behind an iconostasis as in most Eastern Churches, but behind a curtain. As it commenced, the curtain was drawn open and clouds of incense poured forth into the church.

Today, from Revelation, we saw a picture of how they worship in heaven. It's like a curtain is lifted and we're given a glimpse of the glory and beauty and majesty of the heavenly court. In the centre of the magnificent scene is a Lamb, once crucified but now sitting upon a throne. All "blessing and glory and wisdom and . . . honour and power and might" belong to him.

Revelation was written to encourage those who were being persecuted for their faith. John uses strange and vivid images to share with them the Good News that "salvation belongs to God and to the Lamb." The Lamb knows what it's like to suffer and die, but has conquered death and now rules in glory for evermore.

As we celebrate the saints today, we do so not to focus exclusively on them. They'd be the last to want that. We honour them because their lives honoured Christ. Our focus is still, as it always is, on the Lamb at the centre, i.e., on Jesus. Apart from Jesus we have nothing to offer. Apart from him there is no Good News.

We proclaim Jesus, not ourselves. We present him, not some ideas about him. Jesus came saying, not, "Hold to this set of propositions about me because they're true." He said "I am the truth." Without Jesus, we have no real idea what the truth is. He's the ultimate reference point.

It's said that today, in our age of relativism where people make up their own rules depending on what suits them, what we need is a return to absolute, objective truth. But in one sense all truth is relative. It's relative to the person of Jesus Christ. Apart from him, we have no idea what truth is. Jesus never said, "You must believe this set of propositions about me – ABC – now sign on the dotted line." He said, "Follow me." "Take up your cross." "Be my disciple." In baptism we say "I want to be a follower of Jesus and a member of his body."

In our worship, Jesus is central. In our preaching, Jesus is central. In the sacraments, Jesus is central. All truth is relative to him, but today for most people, truth is relative to them as individuals.

In 1985 Robert Bellah and Richard Madsen, in *Habits of the Heart*, a sociological study of Americans in the 1980s, interviewed a young nurse whom they named Sheila Larson. She says, "I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice...It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think He would want us to take care of each other." A religious journal later called Sheila the "theologian of the 80s."

"Sheilaism" is defined in its own Wikipedia article: "A shorthand term for an individual's system of religious belief which co-opts strands of multiple religions chosen by individuals usually without much theological consideration." Since then, more recent scholarship has noted that even those who claim a

particular organised denomination and regularly attend church have highly individualized perceptions of their faith.

The same predominates in Australia: something personal, private and individualistic. “What works for you is fine, but it may not be my thing. You believe in Jesus Christ; I have my own little voice. You like Earl Grey tea. I prefer Irish breakfast.” And in this context it’s very difficult, if not impossible to have a serious conversation about religion. Because any claim Jesus makes like, “I am the truth” is met, not with opposition – like “What a load of rubbish” – but rather, “Well if that makes you happy, if it works for you, fine go with it. I’m not here to stop you. I have my own personal opinion or philosophy (like Sheila). And it’s authentic, because it’s *me*, not some hand-me-down like you Christians seem to have.”

Well since the 80s, the rapid growth of social media and online blogging and so on, has made it even more challenging. Now, anyone can say anything and expect to be heard. “You believe what you like, and I’ll believe what I like” has given way to a more militant and often hostile opposition to religion, especially with the rise of atheism.

The Dean of Chelmsford Cathedral, Nicholas Henshall recently wrote a column in *The Tablet* about two run-ins he had with militant humanists over the last few years in which he had agreed to defend Christianity in debate. He said, “In each context, the . . . argument had a predictable familiarity: the absurdist caricature of various forms of traditional religion, without any context or investigation; assertion in place of argument; outrageous overstatement and misrepresentation.” For example, “the humanist speaker made the extraordinary claim that Christians were responsible for both Stalin and the Holocaust.

“There was the predictable (but still to me profoundly shocking) misuse of facts, including a bizarre and presumably intentional misquotation from the Anglican funeral service to suggest it meant the opposite of what the text said – and oblique and utterly out of context references to Paul and Leviticus (again failing to refer to the actual texts).

“Most disturbing of all was the ridiculing of prayer – or rather, what the speaker claimed religious people meant by prayer. This would have been unrecognisable to any Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu or Sikh in the world. It was intellectually disgraceful, philosophically incoherent and viciously dismissive in tone. But of course, equally predictably, the bulk of the audience loved it.”

It had been “a combination of bullying, bombast and fact-free assertion, as dogmatic as any fundamentalist preacher . . .” (*The Tablet*, 12 July 2014, p. 15).

He argues for local churches to respond by engaging in serious apologetics. “The People of God as a body need feeding – and not with notional pleasantries, but with the life-changing demands of an encounter with the living Christ.” The saints and martyrs gave a reason for the hope within them. We need to do the same. Who is Jesus and what difference does he make in your life?

But why listen to the voices of the past? A criticism that’s been around for quite a while now, is that if the church wants to speak to today’s world it needs to get its act together and be relevant, to modernize itself. There’s something peculiarly ironic about this. The modern world encourages us to value only the latest and best. So if that’s true, and if my personal opinions are valued because they’re authentically me, I have actually limited rather than broadened my range of options. My focus has shrunken rather expanded.

The past gives us wisdom and roots and order and stability and it gives us options. It enlarges our vision and broadens our scope. The alternative is to be limited to the narrow focus of what's right for me, what turns me on, what's the latest and best. I turn from being a slave to the past to being a slave to the present. And the present is a ruthless and demanding taskmaster because it's so exhausting trying to keep up. We are gathered together with the great cloud of witnesses who refused to acquiesce to the status quo of their day. Maybe that's why they make us feel uncomfortable. They were weird, let's face it. Even their names were weird: Tertullian, Irenaeus, Ambrose, Athanasius, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila. Their behaviour is even weirder. Why would Francis of Assisi, born into a wealthy family, educated at all the best schools, moved in the right circles, suddenly turn back his horse one day and give all he had on him to a leper he'd passed, then embrace him? What would motivate people to joyfully be fed to the lions, or burned at the stake or roasted on hot griddles or undergo any number of other gruesome deaths? Part of the answer seems to have been their freedom of choice. G.K. Chesterton said "Francis ran away to God the way some boys run away to the circus." William H. Willimon said, "One of the most disruptive, unsettling, revolutionary acts of the church is in telling stories of saints, those men and women throughout history who have said 'No' to the paucity of options given them by the status quo and said yes to the riches of God. Remembrance gives options."

RC theologian Johann Baptist Metz uses the wonderful phrase of the Church as "a community of dangerous memory." That's central to the theology of the Eucharist. The Greek *anamnesis* speaks of this. The communion of saints surrounds us today and every time we meet for worship, especially at the Eucharist. In a sense the saints hold us accountable. We are being critiqued as well as cheered on by those who've gone before. Will we engage in the dangerous exercise of remembering them?

Fr Mark Watson
Canon Pastor

