

In the Church of England, the Church's Year is deeply embedded in the way we practice our faith. As Sunday follows Sunday and we work our way through the events of Jesus' life, we reflect in Scripture on the significance of God's self-disclosure. Christmas, Epiphany, Palm Sunday, Good Friday, Easter Day, Ascension Day, Whitsunday – throughout the year we meditate on how God's love is revealed in Jesus, and how he continues to care for us and for his world.

Of course it's really just a single event. By extending our commemorations over a year, we focus on particular aspects of God's work in Christ, but in fact each festival is part of a single revelation. You can't appreciate Christmas properly, for example, without considering Good Friday, and Good Friday is meaningless without Easter and the Ascension. No Festival stands alone. The Church's Year is a handy way of making sure we meditate on the significance of the different events of Christ's life, but it's important to remember that it's really the self-disclosure of God in a particular human person that happened at a particular time and in a particular place.

We owe a lot to the Church's Year, even though we may not think much about it in practice. But I wonder whether we are aware that running alongside this annual Sunday cycle, there is also another daily Calendar? Most days of the year, the Church encourages us to celebrate particular men and women who have distinguished themselves in their own times by the quality of their discipleship. There are the apostles and evangelists, of course. But lots of others too, from every generation and every age. When I opened up a page in my Lectionary at random, I landed on a fortnight in March when we are invited to remember the following people – Patrick, Cyril, Cuthbert, Joseph of Nazareth, Thomas Cranmer, Walter Hilton, Paul Couturier, Oscar Romero, the Annunciation to Mary, Harriet Monsell. What a list! Patrick is the Patron Saint of Ireland from 5<sup>th</sup> Century, Walter Hilton was an English Mystic of 14<sup>th</sup> Century, Cyril was a bishop and teacher of the early Church, Cuthbert was one of the great northern saints of 7<sup>th</sup> Century, Cranmer was, of course, the deviser of our Prayer Book martyred by Queen Mary, Paul Couturier was a Roman Catholic priest and founder of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity who died in 1953. Oscar Romero was a South American Catholic Archbishop who was martyred in 1980. And

Harriet Monsell founded the Community of St John the Baptist in the 1870s. And to cap them all, Joseph and Mary. You could make a similar list from every week in the year.

But why remember all these people? What's the point of the Saints?

I suppose, to start with, they remind us of the way God wants to work in us, and what we have it in us to become. All these different people had different gifts of personality, came from different times, and lived their lives with different constraints and different opportunities. God loves variety, and provides each of us with unique qualities and potential. He doesn't want us all to be the same. What he does want is for us to become the people he's made us to be, and to fulfil our potential by sharing our gifts in service of one another in community. So let's think about this by reflecting on two important words in the Christian vocabulary – Grace and Communion

God wants each of us to know that we are loved, and so trust him to transform the gifts of personality that we have been born with. This work of God in our inner lives is what we mean by Grace. Grace is God's love in action within us, perfecting our natures. This inner transformation isn't something that we can do for ourselves. It's something that only God can do. But of course it's necessary for us to co-operate with him, continually saying "Yes" as he reaches out to love us, to challenge us, to prune us, to nudge us forward. The point about the Saints is that they show us what can happen when we do say "Yes" to God; how our lives can be transfigured; how we can be used. The Saints show us what happens when God is allowed to work in human lives, and show us how this process takes place in a huge variety of different people.

St Paul describes it for us. What happens is that we begin to reveal the fruits of the Spirit – patience, self-control, kindness, humility and the rest. These are human qualities that don't exist in the abstract. They reveal themselves differently in different personalities, through the rough and tumble of daily relationships; in the care of an elderly parent, for example; in the support of a vulnerable neighbour; in the encouragement of a difficult colleague; in the challenge to do our duty when it is

against our immediate interests; in the ‘trivial round and common task’ of our ordinary daily routines. The circumstances of our lives provide God-given opportunities for us to grow in grace, as we learn to be thoughtful, patient, humble, selfless, generous-hearted, and grapple with those aspects of our personalities that get in the way. All this is worked out, of course, particularly powerfully in our closest personal relationships where the difficult and often painful lessons of acceptance, forgiveness, loving and caring are learned and re-learned. The Saints did not become the people they were by being anything other than sacrificially open to God in the circumstances in which they found themselves. If we want to emulate them, then the place to begin is where we are. Which is, of course, where God is.

So the Saints remind us of what we can become when God is allowed to work within us. That’s the work of Grace. The second word to think about is Communion. We talk about the Communion of Saints, which reminds us is that the membership of the Church isn’t just those of us who are alive today. By far the largest part of the Church is made up of those who have gone before us, with whom we are united in fellowship and in prayer. The Thanksgiving Prayer at the Eucharist – “with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven, we praise and glorify you” – gives us a sense of an eternal dimension and purpose in our lives. It’s good to remember that we are always surrounded by a great host with whom we are one. “O blest Communion, fellowship divine. We feebly struggle, they in glory shine, but all are one in thee, for all are thine.”

Think about your loved ones who have died. Think about all those buried in the Churchyard outside. Look around you at the memorials on the walls. All were real people, and lived lives like just like ours. Today reminds us that they are not just dead and buried, but are one with us in the Church of God. Together we are alive, united in the living Christ, through his resurrection from the dead. “As we ponder their lives” writes Robert Atwell, “we glimpse little by little the face of Christ who is coming to gather up all things in himself. The saints celebrate the vocation of the whole people of God to share in his very being.”

The Saints are not just an added extra to Christian faith. They remind us that God is always working within us by his grace to perfect the child that he loves so much, and wants so much to grow into the wonderful and lovely person that he has made us to be. We are part of a great Communion, a divine fellowship, so let yourself be comforted and encouraged by the great cloud of supporters surrounding you. As we come forward to receive Holy Communion today, pray that we may all continue to grow in God's grace, and know ourselves more deeply a part of the divine fellowship of the Communion of Saints.

Lord God of truth and love,  
'thy kingdom come', we pray;  
give us thy grace to know thy truth and walk thy way:  
that here on earth  
thy will be done,  
till saints in earth and heaven are one.