

Company of Witnesses – sermon for All Saints 2010

I quite often go to Stratford where I have some friends. Now Stratford is going through quite a transformation at the moment. If you cast your mind back to slightly over five years ago now, you may remember the day when it was announced that London would be the host of the 2012 Olympics. The very next day, if you remember, we had the 7/7 attacks in London. But not long after, Stratford became the scene of frantic activity and, in the last couple of years, the new stadium has been fast taking shape, ready for that moment in 2012 when the next Olympic games get underway.

Men and women, trained to the giddiest heights of physical fitness and pushed to their limits, will cycle, swim, dive, jump and, above all, run to the best of their ability. They do it for personal pride, national pride, Olympic glory, for a place on the podium, for a medal made of bronze or silver or, best of all, gold.

Today, the Feast of All Saints, is a celebration of glory, a glory captured in the vivid imagery of the Apocalypse, which provides our first reading today: 'I saw a huger number, impossible to count, of people from every nation, race, tribe and language: they were standing in front of the throne and in front of the Lamb, dressed in white robes and holding palms in their hands.' These are the men and women who, in the words of St Paul, have run the race and kept the faith: they are the martyrs who laid down their lives for Christ; they are the pastors of the Church, the doctors of the church, those who given intellects honed by study and nourished by prayer at the service of the Gospel, the Virgins and Religious, the Holy Men and Women who gave all to follow Christ.

What do this diverse company have in common?

First, they co-operated with God's grace. Like S. Paul, they had hearts changed by the Lord Jesus Christ. They encountered him, were embraced by him, received him into their hearts. S. Paul often talked about hearts: he talked of the heart as the dwelling place of the Spirit (2 Cor 1:22); he wrote of the Law of the Spirit written, not on stone tablets, but on human hearts (2 Cor 3:3); he spoke of never losing heart (2 Cor 4:1). In every way, Paul seemed to wear his heart on his sleeve, but above, he urged the people of Corinth to 'make room in their hearts.' (2 Cor 7:2)

It is the open heart that is ready to accept God's grace. Such a heart is a vulnerable heart: it can be wounded, it can be broken. But hearts such as these are also open to God's love, his mercy and his grace.

Second, they were generous in their response. When Jesus called the disciples they left everything to follow him and did so without question and without delay. The saints do that kind of mad thing; some very literally: think of S Francis, a rich young man who could have lived out his days surrounded by the trappings of wealth, who wanted for nothing, but who sold everything he had, gave everything away and lived a life of poverty and rags: to this very day his example, his love of God, his sheer holiness continues to inspire the church and draw people to Christ. He, and people like him, gave not less than everything.

Third, they were honest. They knew themselves for what they were and they knew their need of God. Without Him, they were nothing; with Him, they were Everything. It was a great privilege to have been at Cofton Park last month, even if it meant having to get up at 1.00am to board a coach; to sit in the rain for four hours, to attend the Mass at which the Holy Father beatified one of the greatest minds of the nineteenth century, John Henry Newman. He knew himself: he didn't want to be made a saint, he was honest about himself and knew his shortcomings. But his very humility and honesty was also part of his sanctity.

Openness to God, generosity in responding to his call, and honesty about oneself: these enable us to run the race and win the crown of eternal life. The Saints are our heroes, our role models and they spur us on. From their place in heaven they guide us and pray for us. We who are still running the marathon can know, and draw comfort from, not only their example, but their abiding love for us.

And today marks the beginning of the journey for one of our number, Chantelle. Too young to know the significance of what is being done here, you know and I know that she is being baptised, born again of water and the Spirit, opening up the way to the life of a child of God, for whom heaven is the final goal at the end of a journey of growing holiness. To her mother, to her Godparents, is entrusted the task of encouragement and guidance along the pilgrim way. Not only are you to nurture her in the faith, but you are to pray for her and with her. What would you say if I were to tell you that your task is not just to help Chantelle to grow as a Christian, but to try and make a Saint of her? And yet that is precisely what is being asked of you. But if you find that daunting, don't forget that you have the Spirit of God dwelling in your hearts to help you. Don't neglect Him! Don't forget Him! Don't ignore the Spirit for from him comes the wisdom and strength, the patience and peace that you will need to help Chantelle as she takes the first steps in her journey of faith.

So let us, on this great day, remember that, as the Gospel tells us, it is the poor in spirit, the gentle, the peacable, the merciful, the seekers after justice, the pure in heart and the persecuted who will take their place in the company of heaven. Let us strive to be among their number.