

## **That Extra Dimension of Being All Saints Day 2009**

On the north side of St Peter's, Willis St there is a stained glass window of St Hugh Bishop of Lincoln. You can tell it is him by his characteristic trademark, the Swan, which he is usually either carrying in his arms, or leading around by a miniature chain around its neck. This was his pet when he was the abbot of Bec in the West Country. If he was kind to animals, that didn't stop him confronting the powerful, in particular those thuggish individuals Richard the Lion heart and King John. He was also a zealous pastoral Bishop in what was then the largest diocese in England, and a reformer of the Church. As you can tell I am keen on him, but then I would be since he is my patron Saint.

It was encouraging to have St Hugh looking down on me when I said my prayers in church. I like his style in many of the ways he operated as a Christian, but as well as the completely different kind of society he lived in, I wonder if I could ever aspire to be anything like him?

Here we are on All Saints day, which rather like the garage sale we have just had of our Fair items, celebrates the left over Saints who didn't make it into the calendar of officially recognised and individually commemorated Saints. It is a day to be quietly grateful for all the unsung exemplars of Christian living who encouraged us to be believers. For the fact is that each one of us stands on the shoulders of others in the decision we made to be a Christian.

But while I am counting my blessings in remembering them, I am also wondering about the question I raised before - is it realistic to think that we might ever become a Saint? The issue was sharpened up for me by the insight offered by a member of the Christian Formation group on Wednesday evening, who pointed out that in the New Testament epistles all Christians, every Christian, is called a Saint. Yet is that a title we could lightly apply to ourselves when we consider the character description of such people as outlined in the Beatitudes that we have just listened to? Isn't this a roll call of heroic actions, and heroic achievements by heroic people? Wouldn't we be inclined to quietly give up if we tried to measure our lives by this exacting standard? Sainthood, forget it, I don't care to get myself tied up in such a perfectionist knot and an intense muddle, might be our reaction.

Still, I am reluctant to divide up the Christian world into an A team and a B team, for fear that the elite over-achievers will leave the rest of us feeling utterly discouraged, and not even trying very much. And the possibility that we are all supposed to be Saints has got me intrigued as I try to work out how God sets about generating such a change process in our lives. Christians are supposed to be different in their manner of living - how does God make us different?

When we look back over the years in which we have been trying to be a Christian the chances are that we will notice a subtle change in some of our attitudes and behaviours. In gradual, undramatic ways we have shifted ground in some of the characteristic ways we react to certain kinds of situations. What we say and think and do has

acquitted a different texture. This is I think brought about by the company we keep. A good marriage has this effect. Our spouse slowly and subtly changes us simply by sharing in the business of daily living with us. So it is with Christian existence. As we keep company with Jesus Christ our Saviour, in an invisible faith union, we become much more than we otherwise might have become, while at the same time being ourselves, remaining who we always were, in essential terms.

And that helps to shed fresh light on what Jesus was getting at in the Beatitudes. What is asked of us is also given. What we could never do in our own strength has been provided beforehand in order to get us started. The Kingdom that Jesus is always on about is itself a gift from God. It is a new world that we are being invited to live in that has arrived without our efforts. All we are being asked to do is to step into it, and let ourselves be changed by participating in it. Donald Hagner got it in one pithy phrase when he wrote, “grace precedes requirements.” The big ask of the beatitudes is accompanied by a generous serving of Divine grace that encourages us, strengthens us, inspires us, resources us, to try living in this deeply satisfying way.

There is a different time dimension in beatitude living too. We are living towards the future, from which fresh resources of Divine grace are proceeding to refresh and renew us. We are growing into the sort of people described in the beatitudes – slowly, and with the odd setback of course – but we are a work in progress. The beatitudes aren’t the entrance requirements for getting into the Kingdom. They are rather a character outline of the kind of

people and their behaviours that we become in our fully developed Christian destinies.

We live in a world that is oriented to the here and now. It promises a kind of heaven on earth – if you have a high disposable income, the right things and possessions, a beautiful body, a successful career, and attractive friends. The people of the beatitudes see through all that, and won't settle for these shallow promises and false freedom. They live towards God's future, not minding too much the uncool diminished circumstances that are the appearances of beatitude living. They have an extra dimension of existence, orientated as they are to a future horizon. This extra dimension of being is brought about by an inner transformation as a result of the action of the Holy Spirit. At times this inner remodelling process can produce a kind of disoriented feeling as our old instincts, habits and affections get knocked about a bit. But that doesn't matter so long as we are moving towards God, rather than away from him. In fact, at times it can feel as though we are in darkness as our old world of shabby compromises and complacent moral failures are shown up in a new light of shame making illumination. The ability to cope with healthy doses of truth about our situation is a sign that we are on the road to the Kingdom.

Several months ago in Australia I heard a Rumanian Orthodox priest give an intriguing lecture on experiencing the Holy Spirit. "You seem to assume," I said afterwards, "that you have to be a saint to experience union with God." He replied, "There are two kinds of saints, successful saints of the kind I have been talking about in my lecture, and unsuccessful saints like me." On balance I think

this is a good analysis, but I have high hopes that we will all grow into becoming successful saints.