

All Saints' Day Year A 2020

This time of the year seems to be about just that - time. We alter the clocks, half-term is over and the time again rules, we begin (or would begin, in 'normal times') preparations for Christmas - a few weeks ago I bought something on line from a Christian supply company and now it is e-mails 'only four weeks to Advent', 'only eight weeks until Christmas', get ready, don't leave things until it is too late - time, time, time! Even the liturgical year forces us to think about time - third Sunday before Advent, second Sunday before Advent. But at least there is space within the Christian practice of our faith to join time to timelessness. We can place them (time and timelessness) within even our own short time-span, in parallel.

When God became man, he entered not only our space but also our time, being born at a particular time, in a particular place, within a particular religion, ethnic group and culture. He was loved by a particular family, admired by particular followers, became a teacher and healer, challenged local laws and customs, endured local justice - all within the bounds (or should that be bonds?) of time. The Gospels spell this out for us - 'In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea'; In

those days, ..., when Quirinius was governor of Syria (Mary) gave birth to her first born son'. The historical Jesus is very firmly set in time, as we are. I am one of a few people who have not only date of birth but time of birth on their birth certificate - so that I can remind my twin brother that I am older than he - if only by thirty five minutes. The state knows when I was born, where I was born, when I entered paid employment, when I passed my driving test, when I got a passport, when I lost my passport, when I left the country and when I returned, when my daughter was born, when I got married and to whom, and when he died. Life fully documented, date stamped, officially recorded. Time is so important - but so is timelessness. The Jesus of faith is timeless - remember the Letter to the Hebrews - 'Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son'; or, perhaps especially, John's Gospel 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us'. Time and timelessness - two trains on parallel tracks, one going just (it seems) to the end of the line, the other out of sight on an endless journey.

So in these November days we think of time and timelessness - today of the timelessness of our faith going back to the one who was in a particular place at a particular time and yet was also 'in the beginning'; we think of those who have followed him from the beginning of what we call Christianity, beginning with Stephen whose death we remember, and indeed celebrate, the day after we celebrate Christ's birth - a sharp reminder, 'the feast of Stephen', of the cost of discipleship. We can think of St Regulus in the 4th Century walking from Greece to Scotland with his precious cargo of the bones of St Andrew; we can think of St Francis in our window here, a follower of the one who had no place to lay his head, and we can think of all those described by John in his Revelation - the great multitude that no one could count, who fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God. We, here now, are part of a chain of faith that stretches back to those who knew the timeless one, during his time on earth. All part of God's timeless plan for his creation.

Today, All Saints' Day, we remember not just 'the great and the good', but also, perhaps especially, all those ordinary people who have lived out the ideals Jesus sets before us in his sermon on the mount, people who have brought joy to others, hope to those

in despair, courage to those who feel like giving up, light to those in darkness - heroes and heroines we meet every day who would never think of themselves in that way.

There is a timelessness today in our celebration, remembrance and thanksgiving as we link together, this year, the feasts of All Saints and All Souls - All Saints looking back as far as when the timeless one dwelt amongst us and All Souls as we remember those we knew personally - parents, grandparents, spouses, children, inspiring teachers, caring doctors and nurses and 'carers, friends and neighbours, those whose lives have touched us personally and whose lives have made this world a better place to live in. Their praise may never be sung publically, they won't have a special day named after them in the church calendar, but with countless thousands of others, they stand before the throne of God and worship him.

The heavenly court is an international assembly of ordinary people who have been faithful to God, real people - and not just people 'like us' - some of whom have struggles with doubt, crisis, frustration, have been torn apart by grief or pain, have hungered and thirsted - both for food and water and for peace and justice. It is not a place set aside for the scrupulously pious who would

fail an interview for membership of the human race - it is truly a place of 'every nation and race and language' - when you get there you might be quite surprised by who is standing next to you! All these people are Jesus folk. These are the people who have enlivened the history of the church with their quiet witness, the people whose lives are unheralded and whose names are mostly unknown - but Jesus knows their names, because they are his people, the saints, and today we remember and give thanks.