

# 'Let us rejoice and keep a festival in honour of the Saints'

As we celebrate the Feast of All Saints we remind ourselves of that unnumbered host of all those, named and unnamed, who surround the throne of God. As the Book of Revelation puts it, 'that huge number, impossible to count, of people from every nation, race, tribe and language, standing in front of the throne and in front of the lamb, dressed in white robes and holding palms in their hands.' Yes the Church triumphant in heaven, a company as diverse as it is numberless, rich and poor, prophets, priests and martyrs, missionaries, founders of religious orders, so many different people – the variety increasing as the life of the church goes on from generation to generation, and as we acknowledge the saints of our own era, among them soon to include two former popes, John XXIII and John Paul II.

Speaking of this day in one of his sermons as an Anglican, John Henry Newman, writes, 'how we crowd... Up into one day... In the brief remembrance of an hour, all the choicest deeds, the holiest lives, the noblest labours, the most precious sufferings... ever saw', adding that if we read all their names in our service it would outrun many settings and risings of the light.' Newman urges us to observe as many individual saints days throughout the year, for, he says, they set before us 'patterns of excellence for us to follow' and contrast with 'the fault of these times' whereby, we can scarce open the lighter or popular publications of the day with out falling upon some panegyric on our selves'. I wonder what he would make of today's so called celebrity culture and all we read in the press! His own take on it is to remind us of the 'temptation to self-conceit' and remind us also that we have been 'far outdone by the men and women' of the past, whose 'standards of holiness' we are not likely to reach! He continues, for we know what he is like once he gets his teeth stuck into something, that the 'showy talents in which the present age prides itself, fade away before the true metal of the prophets and the Apostles 'but a shadow... Of the vigorous strength of heart which they displayed. Again I wonder what he would make of what we call 'celebrity', which after all seems something very shallow, or at least that's how I see it! I couldn't but be amused to read a few weeks ago, that the future of *Strictly come dancing* was in question because they were running out of 'celebrities' to invite on to the show. Well pardon me, even in terms of celebrity some of the current lot are hardly in the forefront of celebrity, I presume any 'A' list celebs wouldn't touch it with a barge pole!

For Newman the celebration of All Saints Day was a timely reminder that despite 'the vicissitudes of this world... Christ's Church is indestructible', 'what wonders, he says, shall have happened before the (yearly) circle of festivals has run out again!' One never knows-he advises against feeling sorry for ourselves when things don't seem to be going very well, always a temptation as we struggle to be Church in these difficult Times – we may well be 'suffering for our own faults', rather pray for God's grace and 'say nothing for sayings sake, but do much and say little!' Excellent advice.

So what about us? What chance have any of us of becoming saints? How do we achieve anything like the holiness of God's blessed ones? Why should we bother in any case, leave it to others. Well it is the vocation of all Christians to strive for holiness, the perfection of the saints, whether we realise it or not. As a Christian and a priest Newman certainly realised he had to do his utmost to become a saint. No easy thing, a very difficult task in fact as he remarked on more than one occasion, saying that for him 'it was like he had to climb a high ladder which swayed to and fro... he was afraid, but he would not give up because God had promised the necessary grace.' As he got older, he wryly remarked that it is much more difficult to be a saint in one's old age than in youth!' Newman didn't give up or give in easily, as we know and as the Vicar is always telling us! Yes God's grace not only made him into an outstanding son of the Church in his own day, but has seen him declared 'Blessed' in our own time and now well on the way to being declared a saint!

As we consider Newman's own sanctity, that there was a certain something about him in his own lifetime is undeniable, yes he could be over sensitive and easy to take offence, there seemed also to be an habitual shyness and reserve that caused him to appear stiff and cold; his own bishop took a while to warm to him, but his humility and holiness was apparent, and as the same bishop was to remark 'there is a saint in that man'... 'I felt annihilated in his presence.'

So what are our chances? How holy are we? How firmly are our feet placed on that swaying ladder that leads towards sanctity, as we take each rung on the climb to true holiness? Are we just hanging on, about to fall or are we making some progress?

For Newman it is the little things that make all the difference, in his own writings and preaching, the path to holiness lies not in aiming for great deeds of heroism or sacrifice but in the everyday, 'in the little things... the continued practice of small duties' which might be 'distasteful to us'. In living the Christian life he says 'nothing is more difficult than to be disciplined and regular... adding, Its very easy to be religious by 'fits and starts'!

No holiness is achieved by acts which may appear of no particular significance in themselves but Newman says, 'How mysteriously little things are in this world connected with great', and how a 'single moment, improved or wasted, are (can lead to) salvation or ruin. As he grew older, when indeed he was finding it harder to be holy than when young, or so he said, he was to remark that 'I have ever made consistency the mark of a saint'... 'to do well the ordinary duties of the day'! He speaks of 'that little deed, suddenly exacted of us, almost suddenly resolved on and executed'... or 'the silent duties of every day' which are 'blest for the sanctification of thousands whom the world knows not of.'

In all this lies the seeds of holiness, the small acts that lead towards the gates of heaven. The world may not recognise true holiness, it may not recognise those who are truly saints, indeed he says 'the holier a person is, the less they are understood by the world! And doesn't this morning's Gospel – the Beatitudes remind us of that very fact! Sanctity should not be confused with the honours and glory bestowed by society in this visible, yet passing world. For Newman the seed of real sanctity is not even faith, rather it is LOVE, as he remarked, 'Faith can make a hero, but love makes a saint.' And for true holiness' there is no calculation, no struggle, no self-regard, no investigation of motives, we act from love.' Rather we 'do everything thankfully and joyfully'; not disturbed by the 'world 's frowns' nor living for 'it's smiles' either.

Holiness is a beautiful thing 'nothing so pleasant as to do God's service' says Newman. OK some of us may not look that beautiful, some of us look a little haggard and frayed at the edges, but the holy soul has its own 'bloom and comeliness'.

We may grow 'older in body' but says Newman, so may we to 'year by year grow more youthful in spirit.' Yes its difficult trying to be a saint, trying to be holy, 'by nature', says Newman, 'we can not, but by grace we can... and little by little we will do great things! And for those who might think themselves holy already well... as Newman reminds us' it is most true that the holier a man is... so much the greater need has he to look carefully to his footing, lest he stumble and be lost!

That's enough of Newman and the past, though you must indulge me as it is my 60th birthday and I am very fond of Cardinal Newman – so moving to the present and that 'huge number, impossible to count', we know of people like Mother Teresa or John Paul 11 who may have recently joined those holy ranks, but many of the saints truly do go unknown or unrecognised in their own lifetime, names none of us are familiar with –how about Mary Brenner? Who's she? Well she was a wealthy divorcee and mother of 8 from Beverley Hills, she became concerned at the plight of the prisoners in one of Mexico's notorious prisons, La Mesa, after visiting with a priest friend. In 1978 she went to live in the prison amongst the murderers, rapists, drug dealers and thieves, becoming a nun, Mother Antonia-living in a 10 foot concrete cell – a 35 year mission, until her death on October 17th this year – a diminutive figure walking fearlessly among the male and female prisoners touching their cheeks in a gesture of love and concern, chatting and praying with them, speaking out when there was violence or a beating, stopping a riot in the midst of bullets and tear gas. Known as 'the angel of the prison', she did not make excuses for the crimes of the inmates, but as she remarked 'they may have lost their freedom but they have not lost their human dignity.'

Her obituary in 'The Times' tells reveals the life of a truly remarkable woman, whose holiness shone out again and again. Many the deeds that could be recounted, but not this morning! But here is a woman of whom John Henry Newman would have greatly approved, all those little individual acts adding up over 35 years, in the tradition of the Church, to the life of a saint. 86 when she died, and still doing the work God had called her to do, and inspiring others to do like wise, for a number of women have joined her over the years to form 'The servants of the 11<sup>th</sup> hour! Her obituary in *The Times* concluded by saying the Bishop of Tijuana wished to begin steps to start a cause for her beatification! However I think we already know where she is now, without being told!

All Saints Day, a beautiful feast, so let us rejoice and keep festival in their honour. Amen