

All Saints' Day 2024

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. **Amen.** (Psalm 19.14)

When I first came to Christ Church all those years ago we as the Church of England were in transition from this book of services The Alternative Services Book (ASB) authorised in 1980 to Common Worship (CW) authorised in 2000 for public worship.

At the time a decision had to be made here at Christ Church whether to purchase the black books you hold in your hands or purchase booklets instead. I was sure we needed to purchase the books, the overriding concern not being ecological, but rather people should be able to hold them in their hands as a book (something substantive) and therewith be exposed to a variety of materials. And should the sermon be wanting or our thoughts stray allowing people, should they wish, to explore the book. There is value in seeing a breadth of services and materials that the church offers such as the one entitled Thanksgiving for the Healing Ministry of the Church, which is more than a thanksgiving service as it includes the laying on of hands and/or anointing and prayers for the sick thereby witnessing to and living out today God's healing ministry made manifest in and through Jesus. On Sunday we heard Jesus say to Bartimaeus, "Go, your faith has made you well." Faith as a source of health and well-being. On Sunday Bishop Robert will be with us for a Confirmation service and pray, "Confirm, O Lord, your servant with your Holy Spirit. Amen."

Today on this All Saints' Day 2024 of our Lord, the great harvest festival of the Church, reminding us that all is safely gathered in, I want to direct our attention to what is called the calendar beginning on page 1 of the black prayer books (after the Roman-numerals-numbered pages) followed immediately by the Seasons followed by the Holy Days on pages 5 through 16. These the seasons of the year, the Sundays of the year, the Holy Days of the year with the Saints Days of the year are the four elements that give shape and order to the Christian year. An ecumenical colleague only the other day said he was looking forward to Advent.

On pages 5 through 16 you see a list of Christian persons that the Church and more specifically the Church of England commemorates. Each person is given a date on which they are commemorated. It often being the date of their death, their passing. In Christ through our baptism into his saving life and death we are born to eternal life. The holy men and women listed, these saints are not only from England, but also include men and women from across the Anglican Communion. If that were not enough it also includes saints from before the Reformation and going back to before the Great Schism of 1054 between the Latin West and the Orthodox East. It also includes post Reformation holy ones from across the denominations. It is an ecumenical calendar. It is a generous calendar. Because our God is a generous God

and because the Holy Spirit bloweth where it listeth filling men and women with overflowing grace in every generation and throughout the changing seasons of their lives. All Saints' Day is a day that witnesses to the work of the Holy Spirit in every age. You may even say it is the Feast of The Holy Spirit?

The Church's history of which we are part is not only one of failure as many are led to believe by a hostile or indifferent climate to the faith we hold dear, but it is also a history of grace and grace abounding. Grace plentiful. Often in a Baroque church you will see the Latin inscription *gratia plena*, full of grace. We not only have a gospel to proclaim, but also a story to tell, the story of grace! In front of the Austrian National Assembly is a statue of Justitia with her eyes bound that she, Justitia, may be free of bias and the scales are finely and evenly balanced. The image of the scales is the one that I wish us to see reminding us that grace is bountiful. Grace is plentiful outweighing the sins of the world, but these too remain plentiful. We see our sins, but often, too often fail to see abundant grace, more than can be measured. We not only have a gospel to proclaim, but also a story to tell, the story of grace!

Looking at the calendar and especially doing so on All Saints' Day, we as members of a historic church are freer or should be freer to acknowledge that God's grace is at work in every generation. We see that in Christ we are one with those who have gone before. We seek to live this oneness not simply in the confines of our four score years and ten. We are not only surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, but we are also carried by these witnesses in Christ. Being encouraged and even inspired by how they lived their Christian lives in the service of God as members of Christ's body the Church. May we do so as the collect directs 'in all virtuous and godly living'.

One of the things we note as Anglican Christians through this generous calendar and the keeping of it is that the Church is greater than ourselves. It is greater than our Church, the Church of England. It is greater than the Anglican Communion. It is greater than those alive at this present moment. She, the Church, God's creation embraces men and women from across and down the centuries and from all walks of life. All Saints' Day is a big day in the life of the Church and needs to become a big day in the life of Christians even those, us, who have been brushed by the insights and correctives of the Reformation namely that it is through God's grace and God's grace alone that we are saved. Alleluia. But we must also give thanks and great thanks for God's grace made manifest in the lives of our brothers and sisters in Christ. In so doing we honour and witness to workings of the Holy Spirit since the first Day of Pentecost and our lives are enriched.

In drawing to a close I went through the calendar listing all the categories mentioned and in doing so I noticed a number of things. Two of these were to what extent the Christian faith through the Church has contributed to the intellectual life of the world and how it has especially in the 19th century become a catalyst for social change

including prison reform, and famously for ending slavery. Today the church works for the ending of what is termed “modern slavery”. This term highlights the exploitation and trafficking of children as well as that of women and men. I missed some things in the calendar, but probably a deeper probe would show how the church was at the forefront of education, health provision and ensuring the poor were cared for from the earliest times. In one of my recent weekly missives I quoted from Paul’s first letter to Timothy,

“As for those who in the present age are rich, command them ... to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.”

The category in the calendar however that received the most mention was that of the martyrs. These are those who in the Church’s history were the first to be remembered. Martyr is a Greek word meaning witness. It is these martyrs who in their living and in their dying witnessed to Christ with the whole of their lives on the foundation of Christ who won for them and for us the Crown of Life. Life everlasting! Because Christ lives we live! Jesus lives!

Jesus lives! our hearts know well
nought from us his love shall sever;
life, nor death, nor powers of hell
tear us from his keeping ever.