

All Saints Day Sermon

Our mission, should we choose to accept it, is to change the course of history using a task force of just 12 people.

Who are we going to choose? Twelve people who would make an impact on the world. Let's think.

- We'll obviously need an orator or wordsmith. Someone good with words to inspire and persuade others. To impart vision and encourage commitment. Perhaps a politician or a barrister?
- Then we'll need someone to convince the intellectuals. To give the movement some kudos. Perhaps a much-published philosopher or an eminent scientist. A Noble laureate would be nice.
- A psychiatrist is a must. We've got to know what makes people tick, how their minds work. So we can devise techniques to change them.
- We must make an impact in the market place of ideas, so we'll need cutting-edge PR. Let's recruit a top advertising executive or a prize-winning journalist – experts in sound bytes and 'spin'.
- The whole operation requires a firm financial footing, so we'll have to include a successful Independent Financial Advisor to tell us how to invest our working capital.
- Oh!....I nearly forgot....we must be politically-correct; so there should be six women and six men on the team, two members from ethnic minority groups and at least one person otherwise-abled. We must have a fair quota of vertically, gravitationally and folliclely-challenged people (that's short, fat and bald to you and me!).
- Now, before we get underway, we'll need to consult HR to discuss contracts, expense accounts, DBS clearance and an ethical company car policy.....

Of course, in any venture, it's much safer to choose people with a proven track record. You know you'll get the job done. It might be completed with all the "pizzazz" of a wet February afternoon, but if its results you're after, such choices will guarantee, at the very least, a hard fought goalless draw!

Jesus opted for different tactics in team selection. In St Peter, he promoted a Wayne Rooney among disciples – capable of sublime victories of faith, and depressing defeats of denial. From "*You are the Christ,*" to "*I don't even know him*" all within the space of six Gospel chapters.

And as for his team-mates.....well some of them we wouldn't trust to take the collection, let alone the message of Christ to a needy world.

There was St Matthew the tax collector – a heartless swindler and Roman collaborator, despised by his own countryfolk.

And Simon the Zealot – a political revolutionary; an expert with knife or club; his hands stained with the blood of Roman soldiers.

And then the fishermen, Saints Andrew, James and John. Down to sea-level, uncompromising characters. Their education would have been basic, their language savoury and their tolerance threshold for wandering would-be Messiahs is likely to have been very low indeed.

It was people like this that Jesus gathered around himself. Not the ceremonially-spotless and naturally-intelligent rabbinic students of Jerusalem. St Paul would later reflect upon such actions as the choice of what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, and what is weak in the world to shame the strong.

We tend to think of the Apostles as the first saints. But *sainthood* or *holiness* is hard to encompass. The Hebrew, Greek and Latin words – *qadosh*, *hagios* and *sanctus* – could be applied to God himself, to people or indeed to places. When applied to people and things, holiness meant ‘set apart for a sacred purpose’. It’s only later that notions of ethical purity emerged. And this has been a mixed blessing, of course. Secular people tend to equate holiness with a rather weak, feeble and naïve ‘goody-goody’ type of person. We say that a long-suffering person has ‘the patience of a saint’. Church History proves otherwise.

If there’s one word which I tend to link with the word ‘saint’ it’s the word *strength*, not weakness. But this strength is not to be confused with the popular buzz-word of ‘resilience’; it goes much deeper than the *dorsolateral prefrontal cortex* of the brain. It resides in the very ground of our being. Inspired preachers and teachers, dynamic church-builders and church reformers, persistent activists and contemplatives, self-sacrificial missionaries and martyrs. You have to have great inner fortitude to be meek and merciful, to be a peacemaker, or to hunger and thirst after righteousness. (Matthew 5) Over the centuries, there have been thousands of gloriously-varied, unpredictable, often-eccentric, and occasionally downright wacky women and men who have incarnated God’s spirit at work in his world.

We all have our favourites. Mine is St Simeon the Stylite. Simeon was born at the end of the fourth century. The son of a shepherd, he subjected himself to ever-increasing physical austerity. For twenty years or so he lived in various hermitages and monasteries in northern Syria. But then, in 423, he began to live on a pillar. Low at first, over the years its height grew to 60 feet. It was about twelve feet square with a protective balustrade. There, Simeon spent the remaining thirty-six years of his life. He was certainly ‘set apart’.

It seemed that 'despairing of escaping the world horizontally, Simeon tried to escape it vertically.' He failed. Crowds flocked to hear his teaching and receive his advice. Even emperors visited. He was kind and sympathetic. His instructions were full of common sense and, ironically, free from fanaticism. In an age of licence and luxury, Simeon bore witness to virtue and selflessness. And that is why he is a saint.

If only it were as easy as applying a list of job specification criteria to identify women and men of God. If only we could categorize and classify holiness, or produce a computer spreadsheet on saintliness, the Church of Christ would be so much more business-like and effective, wouldn't it? Mmmmmm....I wonder.

Throughout its history the church has wrestled with this dichotomy of *law* and *spirit*. So often we've let *law* win the day, and Christ has been crucified over and over again. But it's the spirit which gives life, and the spirit, like the wind, moves where it wills. It cherishes and inspires in unexpected ways. It sometimes locates saintliness in people we wouldn't dream of inviting round for tea. It stands against the neurotic obsessions of our times. It values the immeasurable.

It might surprise you to know that the word 'saint' never appears in the Bible – not in the singular that is. The word is always found in the plural. In the New Testament, it was the apostolic designation for all Christians. So, St Paul addresses his letters to the saints collectively at Ephesus, at Philippi and at Colossae. And this practice continued right up to the time of Irenaeus and Tertullian in the late second century CE. It's only much later that, in ecclesiastical usage, the word 'saint' became an honorific title through formal canonization.

Community is the vital aspect of Sainthood. Today we celebrate All Saints. We give thanks for those woman and men who have been strong in incarnating the life of the spirit in the world. We believe in the *Communion of Saints*, as we declare in the Apostles' Creed. We

rejoice in that spiritual solidarity which binds us together with the saints in heaven, in the mystical body of Christ.

As we heard from Revelation, the Church Triumphant is that “great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.” (Rev 7.9) They are what the writer to the Hebrews calls, “a great cloud of witnesses” (Heb 12.1). And what do they witness? Us. You and me as we live out our Christian lives. And more than that. Much more. They pray for us in our struggles, for nobody understands better than they.

We are the Church Militant. Saints of God. Called to be distinctive. To be in the world but not of it. Set apart for the sacred purpose of demonstrating the love of Christ in Clifton and the wider world. No pressure then! May almighty God give us the grace to become what we are.