

**Downing Place United Reformed Church
Cambridge**

**Sunday 3rd November 2019
All Saints**

Sermon

Daniel 7.1-3, 13-18; Psalm 149; Ephesians 1.11-end; Luke 6.20-31

We are in the church season for celebrating All Saints – those for whom there is no day, no statue, no window. Saints have been a lot on my mind recently. Famous ones in the church's calendar and others.

Last week I represented the United Reformed Church at the British celebration of the canonisation of Cardinal Newman. This was a simple, moving ceremony in Westminster Cathedral, where the Archbishop of Canterbury preached. That itself was remarkable. Teasing the current Cardinal, a Scouser, and a Liverpool supporter, Justin Welby suggested that a hundred years ago, his preaching in Westminster Cathedral as the Anglican Archbishop was as unlikely as today's Cardinal going to watch Everton. But of course, it symbolised St John Henry Newman's spiritual journey from the Church of England to the Church of Rome. Not that that was why he has been made a saint. The requisite two miracles apart, that's surely down to his life of abiding faith, enriching thought and consistent good works.

And then there's Jessye Norman, the African American dramatic soprano who died at the end of September. Was she a saint? Well, she's not been canonised, but her sense that we all have the responsibility 'to look beyond ourselves', and to obey the Golden Rule, certainly means that she used her fame not merely for self-aggrandisement (though how grand she was!) but to press for justice. As she puts it in her memoir, *Stand up straight and sing*, 'We need ... a sufficient amount of indignation to insist on decent housing, a living wage, and nourishing food for all our brothers and sisters, all our elders, all our children.' (283) Citing George Bernard Shaw, she emphasises 'my life belongs to the community.' There's surely something of the saint there.

But when it comes to down to earth saintliness, I think not least about the mother of the suicide at whose funeral Annemarie and I officiated on Thursday. That mix of knowing her need of God's grace, and of showing it to others even amid such intense grief, is the very essence of saintliness in my book.

All saints. So, what's with that weird word we heard from Daniel?

One of the more extraordinary things about the Bible is the material we call apocalypse. Daniel is part of it. It's supposed to be revealing. Indeed, that is what the Greek behind the word 'apocalypse' means – to uncover or unveil. Truth to tell, much of the stuff we call apocalypse is so dense in its metaphor and allusion that we can end up feeling we need revelation about the revelation. And Daniel 7 is no exception.

When Daniel dreams, he sees four beasts emerge from the sea in the midst of a storm. They trouble him. He asks what they mean. And people have forever wondered exactly what they represent. The traditional interpretation is that they are four nations that had consecutively subjugated Israel, and dominated it for the five centuries before Daniel was most likely written, half as millennium before Jesus Christ. Babylon, Media, Persia and Alexander the Great's Greek imperialism. History is littered with nations oppressing each other, and Europe in the twentieth century is no exception. Walls only get dismantled because first they were built. This week sees the thirtieth anniversary of when the Berlin Wall 'come tumbling down', and of the centenary of the first Remembrance Day on 11th November 1919. With those in kind, perhaps we can recognise the intensity and power with which Daniel's image of the four nations is invested.

In verse 13, Daniel's 'night visions' includes another figure, which comes in the wake of the dream's terrifying monsters. This one is 'like a human being', and again there are different explanations for what is intended. An angel? Israel itself? Understandably, later generations saw this human figure as Jesus, and Mark's Gospel is explicit about that connection. (13.26; 14.62). For Daniel himself, the identity is more opaque, but he does seem to distinguish between the beasts as bad and the human being as an agent of God's reign, by which, in Jesus' words, enemies are loved, shirts are shared and beggars are fed. The troubling monsters are weak to those who shine with the light of God's grace and truth.

What shall we do with this dream today as we ponder saints? I don't think we need to borrow the old interpretation that the four beasts are aggressive nations, though we'd probably think of four relatively easily. Equally, I imagine we could all think of four things that trouble us and our world today. We may each happen upon a different quartet, but, in just a few moments, I had thought of the beast we call **loneliness** which robs too many people of companionship, some of them in older age, and, equally troubling, some of them in the school playground or in the university room they newly occupy, far from home, and farther still from their next door neighbour. Then I thought of those beastly **-isms** which prejudice some people against others, sometimes to the point of ridicule but even unto rejection – prejudice because of race, gender, sexuality, intellectual aptitude, or mere distinctiveness. Thirdly, I quickly realised what a beast the **ecological crisis** is, almost literally 'winds stirring up a great sea', which deprive Pacific islanders of their homes and signify the changing climate we all experience. And fourthly, so many of us have our own **more personal, more intimate beasts** with which to contend – too little money, too *much* money; too much work; our own or a loved-one's health; bereavement which robs us of one whose presence made us feel complete. When these things – loneliness, -isms, ecological crisis or personal problems - are our reality, we, like Daniel, can dream of them, and be troubled.

As we ponder saints, are they not those who come to us as beacons of God's light, dispelling our darkneses, and slaying the beasts that menace? It is not that they are perfect – as Desiderata has it, those who are perfect are too hard to live with. Quite the opposite – the best saints are those who know their need of God's grace and goodwill, and in all their ordinariness make it easier for *us* to believe in God's grace and goodwill, too. So it is that those who become our companions – literally those who eat our bread with us – might be saints as they tame the beast of loneliness; those who see beyond the characteristics that others mock, might be saints because they honour us for the people God has made us to be; those who awaken us to the need for ecological wisdom might be saints because they could help us slay the beast that threatens the planet; and those who accompany us through life's shadowy places might be saints because they are the candle that shines with hope.

At the end of the service we will sing from Bishop How's *For all the saints, Alleluia*. For now, I conclude with John Bell's variation on it. As you hear these words, maybe there will be saints for whom you are grateful:

For all the saints who've shown your love,
in how they live and where they move.
For mindful women, caring men,
accept our gratitude again.

For all the saints who loved your name,
whose faith increased the Saviour's fame.
Who sang your songs and shared your word,
accept our gratitude, good Lord.

For all the saints who named your will,
and showed the kingdom coming still.
Through selfless protest, prayer and praise,
accept the gratitude we raise.

Bless all whose will or name or love
reflects the grace of heaven above.
Though unacclaimed by earthly powers,
your life through theirs has hallowed ours.

John Lamberton Bell 1949-