



Sermon preached by Revd John Proctor on 15th January 2023
Reading: Isaiah 49:1-7; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

God of wisdom and truth, will you open your word to our hearts and our hearts to your word. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Called saints (1 Corinthians 1:2) - you must be kidding. Named as God's holy people – you cannot be serious. Invited to mirror the life of God in the world – well, that rules me out for a start. Imagine a group of Christians opening a letter, and finding it said that about them. 'Saints.' You'd be tempted to put the letter back in the envelope, and write on it 'return to sender, no saints known at this address'.

Perhaps some of the Christians who read First Corinthians had that sort of misgiving – 'It just doesn't fit me, that's not the kind of person I am.' Maybe some of us feel the same way. Saints are a strange breed. You have to be dead, to get the title. Most of them end up in stained glass, with a low-voltage glow on top of the head. They're no doubt highly honoured in heaven, but – whisper it quietly – some of them were a pretty awkward bunch on earth. The church may feel it couldn't cope without saints, but it had plenty of trouble coping with them. Saints may be good. But they scarcely seem to be normal. Called to be saints? No thank you.

Perhaps they felt like that in Corinth. Saints? Holy people? Marked out and made new by God? I'd never thought of myself that way, thank you. And Corinth was an odd sort of town to live a godly life in. It had some very strange values, and following a real Christian lifestyle would be a tough business. Who'd be a saint there. Let me tell you about some of what went on in Corinth.

For a start it was a very competitive place – very hung up on status. For many people, rank and power and pride mattered a lot. They wanted to be important, clever, successful and prominent, to let others know about their wealth, to have influential friends, to draw attention to themselves. A lot of people were pushing to the top of the pile. So how do you live by the values of the gospel – humility, service, concern for neighbour? How do you follow the man of the cross – in a place where so many are concerned about power? But what a difference it might make if you did.

Corinth was a colony, an outpost of Empire – the Roman Empire. The great power in town came from Rome. The very top posts were in the emperor's civil service. Leadership and law came from outside. So how do you live by the values of the gospel – integrity of character, in a place that has lost most its own integrity – strength and clarity of purpose, in a community that cannot make its own decisions – confidence in God, in a town that must put all its confidence in a foreign power? But what a difference it might make if you did.

Corinth was not all wealth and power. It had known sharp famine too. In the few years before St Paul wrote this letter, there had been severe shortages of grain in that part of the world. Some would always manage to buy the food they wanted; many could not. Fear and hunger, anger and anxiety, stalked the streets. How do you live by the values of the gospel – sharing, concern for the weak, help for the needy – when every home is short of necessities, and every family is desperate to get enough for itself? But what a difference it might make if you did.

And Corinth was a town with many gods and lords, many options for worship, some of them bound well into the social structure, linked to class, wealth and power. Christianity was a minority faith – a new kid on the block, with a god you could not see and a lord who died on a cross – foreign, fragile, different, odd. So how do you live by the values of the gospel –

rejoicing to love and serve and worship Jesus Christ – in a place where your faith is looked down upon and scorned? But what a difference it might make if you did.

Called saints. Saints are not stained-glass Christians. Saints is one of the Bible's words for Christians: ordinary people who trust in Jesus Christ, ordinary people who make a difference, ordinary people in a complicated world, who follow Jesus amid a maze of other paths and patterns of life. Called saints. So how do you live by the values of the gospel in Cambridge, or in the place where you live and serve? And what difference might it make if we did?

Let's put that thought onto the back burner, and go on to the gospel reading, from the first chapter of John's Gospel. Let's try and get a fix on what it is to be God's holy people, where you start, and what it might mean. John's Gospel Chapter 1 is the story of a new world coming. The first few verses, 'In the beginning was the word ... all things came into being ... the light shines in the darkness', strike half a dozen resonances with the story of creation in Genesis 1. The sequence of days, reeling off one at a time through the chapter - 'the next day ... the next day' – is another echo of the creation story, which also had its repeating pattern 'evening and morning, one more day'. This chapter tells of a new world coming, of new creation taking shape within the old, of Jesus bringing a fresh breath of the ancient power of God.

When people come to find Jesus, and the words are very simple. Come and see; they stayed with him; I will give you a new name. To be God's holy people is just this: to look for Jesus; to linger in his presence; to find him giving us a new sense of who we can be for God. And with him, we find God's creative power breathing new in the world, around us and through us and in us. It's as simple as a friendship, and as deep and sustaining as a friendship can be.

To follow Jesus starts with finding Jesus. To live for Jesus comes from enjoying his company. To make a difference in the world flows from the difference Jesus makes in us.

Let me close with a story. One feature of church life in recent decades is the rise of the notice sheet. To save a string of announcements being read Sunday by Sunday, a neat list is given to worshippers as they arrive, or indeed sent out electronically, showing the complex jigsaw of local church activity. But like many a jigsaw, the notice sheet often seems to come a piece or two short. Someone has to come to the microphone after all, to let people know about a couple of missing pieces that were as-it-were found under the sofa: something we forgot to mention, or that has only just cropped up, or has had to be cancelled.

The title of oddest omission may go to the Church of Christ the Cornerstone in Milton Keynes, the impressive ecumenical centre of worship and witness at the heart of that city. One Sunday some years ago, about the time the building was completed, worshippers heard that, 'One item was missed off the notices this week. On Friday this church is to be consecrated by the Archbishop of Canterbury, in the presence of the Queen.'

Well no doubt people turned up, despite the poor publicity. And to anyone here who has belonged to that church – there is at least one in our congregation – I hope you will not be offended by the episode being retold. But humour apart, that story reminds me of how caught up we can be in the details and running of church life, and overlook the great relationship within which we live. To be Christian is to be a consecrated people, a holy people, called saints. To be church is to be visited, Sunday by Sunday in our worship, and day by day in our individual lives, by Jesus Christ. One item we forgot to mention: we are called a holy people, we are called to live as Christ's people in a complicated world, to be ordinary and yet to make a difference, to be normal and yet to count for God. The great relationship is that we are blessed and honoured with the company of Jesus Christ: come and see, linger and listen, be yourself, and become the person he calls you to be.