

Who are the saints? – Jesus College, 28 May 2017

Readings: Psalm 131; OT: Genesis 12:1-4; NT: I Corinthians 12:12-27

It's almost a week since - through TV, radio, internet & social media - we began to see shocking accounts of last Monday evening's atrocity at the Manchester Arena. Almost a week on and even as we pray for those involved – still we cannot really grasp why anyone would cause such harm, perhaps particularly when perpetrated against the young, the innocent, the undefended. Why?

And yet, amid the why of the violence: we also caught glimpses of the 'why' that holds a nation; a city; a community together.

So, for example –the earliest footage I saw, early on tuesday morning. Of youngsters, running, fleeing , down the auditorium steps. Doing the only thing it made sense to do. Running away from danger.

And yet: as the holder of the phone camera filmed – we could also see: four or five figures in the foreground: ordinary people, in ordinary clothes: going absolutely nowhere. No explanation offered, no interview made. But my guess would be: these were parents. Waiting. So maybe it was dangerous, maybe it wasn't the best place to stand... but it was clear from every ounce of their body language: that they would not be moved. Until moment their child appeared down those stairs, and into the arms of mum or dad: to hold them safe; to them guide away from danger.

Or another example: as across the nation, and across the world, we watched, helpless and horrified. Yet wanting to support and encourage. And no doubt you'll have seen examples that stuck with you - of moving messages, of flowers, of tributes. But the example that sticks in my mind, was of a report a couple of days later. From someone who'd driven 400 miles across France. And on every gantry not needed for current traffic warnings, reported reading: 'Solidarity with Manchester'.

And then of course, there's the third example: of Manchester itself. Of emergency services and hospitals; of taxi drivers; of local people offering everything from medical help to lifts, or food, or shelter, to total strangers...

Who are the saints? That's the question Megan posed more than a term ago, for me to reflect on tonight. Or to put it another way, what exactly are we believing in, when in the Apostles Creed, we declare 'I believe in the communion of saints'?

Well as even I: Yorkie by birth, my home team Hull City regularly and cruelly crushed; indeed recently dispatched to Championship league by – just about everybody really, but including the two great Manchester clubs... as even for me, this week's events have brought a bit of a Spartacus moment, making me want to proclaim: I am Manchester; we are Manchester...

...here comes the executive summary of my talk, which if you don't listen to another word will give you enough to bluff as you encounter me on the way out: **Who are the saints? We are!**

Yet in the end: thanks be to God: not because we have to haul ourselves up by our own bootstraps to become holy: but rather: we are the saints, because of God's grace, & God's holiness.

As 'saints': traced back through old French, to the Latin 'sanctus', so my trusty dictionary informs me... 'saints' – 'haggioi' in NT greek, meaning the 'holy ones'... 'saints' is a term used repeatedly in NT to describe followers of Jesus Christ. So for example in Ephesians I Paul writes: 'To the saints who are in Ephesus'. And at the beginning of his first letter to the Corinthians, from which we heard just now, Paul writes in, I Corinthians 1: 'to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints...'

As all who follow Jesus Christ: are the saints; the holy ones. But you don't get to do it – indeed, you cannot do it – on your own. Which is what I hope this evening's three Bible readings will help us to grasp: that we are the holy ones, the saints – because of God.

Let's start with Psalm 131. One of my favourite psalms. And not just because it is very short. But rather, because of what it speaks, about who God is, and how that takes away any need for me to be something I am not. As psalmist encourages us to put down all pretence: that
'my heart is not proud; my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me...

...but I have stilled and quietened my soul – like a weaned child with its mother... is my soul within me.

Israel [People of God] – hope in the Lord from this time on and forevermore.'

Remember those parents, standing in the face of danger, with only one aim: to save and hold and guide their children away from danger?

Well that parent – the best parent: is yours and mine already. God – waiting: to hold and to keep and to nurture his beloved children: you, and me. As we make our decision: to flee from all else; to come, knowing we bring nothing except ourselves: to come back to God. Stilling and quietening ourselves in God's presence: so that we can know ourselves: loved, and held secure by God. Our status: beloved by God – secured by God's love and grace rather than any of our deeds.

As our turning back, to seek and to be, in the presence of God's holiness - that is what makes us 'holy ones', saints. God's holiness, which is the outshining of all that God is, in total perfection. Seen, in human form, through the life and character of Jesus. And thus, if, with the psalmist, we choose to return to God, to dwell with God: gradually, over time, the character of the one with whom we dwell, grows in us also; as we are saints-in-progress: slowly, over time, becoming more and more Christ-like.

Just as the psalmist describes: Like a contented tiny child with the most perfect of mothers – stilled and quietened in God's presence; all else removed, in order to put our hope in God.

As from that first reading, flows my first point: We are the saints, the holy ones. But never on our own. As only by the love and grace and presence of God, with us, will we grow the character of Jesus Christ.

Then second reading, second point: we are the saints – but again, not on our own, because I Corinthians 12:27 – 'you are the body of Christ and individually members of it'. As God has created and gifted us to be – together. One body, many members – each of us uniquely created and gifted by God, to take our integral part in His body.

As I guess 'the communion (the fellowship) of saints' in which we declare our belief – reminds us in that very phrase – that we are designed by God, for life together. Together with God, together with each other. No matter how irritating we may find our fellow saints.

And the most irritating thing of all – and also the most wonderful – in Paul's prolonged description in I Corinthians 12, of the limitations of a body that is all eye and no ear; all hearing but no smell: indeed the limitations of any combination other than the full body, all together: from nose hairs to kidneys to toenails to all the other weird and wonderful bits that make us up...

The most irritating and wonderful thing is that the less worthy we might suppose a particular person's part is, the more we are called to respect and honour them. As Paul tells us: the members of the body that seem to be weaker - are [in fact] indispensable...

Just as our French neighbours' roadside message reminded us. Even, as we approach some potentially pretty acrimonious moments of negotiation with our European partners: still, France declares, loud and clear: deep solidarity with her neighbour. An example we saints would do very well to follow...

To recognise: we are always richer, for every part of body of Christ. And thus, to offer your own vital part, without stinting – as we, the body of Christ will be much the poorer without you. And also: to

nurture and encourage the part of every other saint you meet... no matter if you cannot grasp what their part is. Because they, and you, are indispensable.

So: take a deep breath, and ask God to help you w your extremely irritating Christian acquaintance, or that church you think is beyond the pale. As you are all one in Christ's body. And if you can lay down your disbelief, you may just be surprised and blessed by what you can give one another!

As first: we are the saints, as we choose to dwell with God. Second, we are the saints, as we choose to dwell within the body of Christ – the communion of saints.

And third and finally, for all you task-focused people nashing your teeth and thinking this is all well and good but what does that mean about what we will do...

Think back to our third reading, from Genesis 12, which I hope helps with my third point. That we are the saints: sent out by God. God: who, extraordinarily, wants to work with and through his people, if only we will work with him.

As the events we read in Genesis 12: begin a repeated pattern through OT, NT & on to today. God: sending his people out: to join God's ongoing story, God's ongoing mission, in successive generations.

Beginning with Abram. Sent out with his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot. Sent out, basically, on mission impossible. A 75 year old man, with a wife beyond the age of childbearing. Yet God telling Abram: all the peoples on the earth are to be blessed through him, and through the offspring Abram and Sarai have no human hope of ever having.

Yet read on, and you will indeed find: God blessing all peoples through Abraham and his offspring . Just as along the way you will find God's sending continues – of Moses, of David; of Jesus; of the 12, of the 72... and then, of course, of the Holy Spirit. Who for the next two millennia, and still today. Continues to send us out, and – if only we will trust God, then even where it seems he calls to mission impossible: still God can and will provide and equip with what is needed.

Ask the people of Manchester. Who found they had what it took, when chips were down. Then ask yourself: as you declare your belief in God, through the words of the Apostles Creed. Ask yourself: if that is who & how God is - then surely God, who is the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth, can easily provide whatever we need, to serve him as he calls and sends us? As we too can learn – just as Abraham, and Moses, and David, and all God's people on, and on, have learned. By stepping out, in faith with God, in whatever he sends or calls us, to do.

So: that executive summary once again, 3 times over...

Who are the saints? We are! Not on our own: but rather [Psalm 131]: our holiness of character formed through choosing to dwell with God;

Who are the saints? We are! Not on our own: but rather 1 Corinthians 12: as part of the body of Christ, in solidarity with every other part: even, or perhaps particularly, in solidarity with those we find least easy;

Who are the saints? We are! As, reminded by Genesis 12: we listen for God's sending and trust God's provision – both for the company of the saints with whom he sends us; and for the people to whom we are sent.

Who are the saints? We are. God help us! So maybe we'd better ask God for just that: his help: let's pray...