

2nd November 2025 - Balsham Sermon

This sermon is loosely based on one published by the Revd Frank Logue, an Episcopalian (i.e. Anglican) priest in Georgia, USA.

How do you define a saint? Would you know a real-life saint if you met one? The early 20th century satirist Ambrose Bierce is someone that I wouldn't regard as a saint. He wrote a series of newspaper columns providing alternative definitions for words in use. These columns were very commonly plagiarised and so he collected them into a book – initially called “The Cynics Word Book” – but eventually more commonly called “The Devils Dictionary”. That's probably a good enough reason for us not to consider him a saint, but listen on. I've used a few of his definitions in previous talks – not necessarily from a pulpit or in the nave of a Church but on occasions where I have rather liked them.

Education, *noun*. That which discloses to the wise and disguises from the foolish their lack of understanding.

Diplomacy, *noun* The patriotic art of lying for ones country.

To which I shall add another which I recently discovered.

Saint, *noun*. A dead sinner revised and edited.

I presume that Bierce's thesis was that if we knew the truth of the saint's life, we would find a truth more complicated and less holy than the legend.

Today we are celebrating All Saints Day – and we'll sing some well known hymns. For those of you that have been following daily services we've had some interesting festivals this week as well. Tuesday was the feast day of Saints Simon and Jude, Apostles. By legend they were both martyred in Persia but there is relatively little about either of them in the Gospels. Simon was sometimes called Simon the Zealot and Jude was later established as the patron saint of hopeless causes, because he was so frequently confused with Judas Iscariot.

On Friday we commemorated someone somewhat more recent - Martin Luther – and on Wednesday the Church of England remembered a more recent martyr – James Hannington.

The Church of England takes a rather different perspective on canonisation (or recognition of Sainthood) from the Roman Catholic church. And it's rather interesting how this all ties together now. Martin Luther set in course the reformation, and nowadays, in simple terms most protestant churches really only consider saints of around the time of Christ and early martyrs. Simon and Jude would qualify. The Church of England takes something of a middle ground and accepts the Saints that the Roman Catholic Church had canonised at the time of the split with Rome but we haven't gone huge bundles on creating new ones since then. Apart from one – but actually his recognition as a Saint got removed from the Prayer Book. In case you are wondering – that was the first King Charles. What the Anglican communion in general and the Church of England in particular do is identify “heroes” – who are often celebrated on particular days. Martin Luther is one – celebrated by the Church of England on the 31st October commemorating the day in 1517 when he nailed his ninety five theses on the church door in Wittenberg (although the Lutheran churches actually celebrate his feast on February 18th just to be confusing). He is a hero to the Anglican Church – and maybe would have not liked the idea of being celebrated as a Saint except in the way that we are all Saints. Isn't becoming a saint a stretch for any of us? How might we live up to Simon and Jude, or even the greats like Peter and Paul? We're helped here with the biblical perspective – saints signify those who are “in Christ” – being dead isn't even a necessary part of the equation – and this is now largely the Anglican viewpoint.

Those apostles that we call Saints, together with many of the first Christ-followers, gave their lives as martyrs to spread the Good News across the Roman Empire. But remember I mentioned a celebration of one James Hannington. He was consecrated by the Church of England as the Bishop of Eastern Equatorial Africa, and was sent along with others to build up the church. Soldiers of King Mwanga captured the group while they were forging a highland route from Mombasa in Kenya to Buganda on the shores of Lake Victoria.

A week later, on October 29, 1885, King Mwanga ordered their executions. They died trying to share the love of God on the shores of Lake Victoria. Even while lamenting our colonial legacy and all the pain and suffering it brought to the countries on the African continent, we can admire the faith of those who sought to serve Jesus knowing it could cost their lives.

In our Gospel reading from Luke, after a series of blessings and woes, Jesus says, “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you,

pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt". We see this faith lived out in James Hannington and his companions. Just before he was put to death, Hannington said, "Go, tell Mwanga I have purchased the road to Uganda with my blood." His steadfastness impressed many of those who witnessed his death. But the persecution was just beginning.

Mwanga had twenty-three Anglican and twenty-two Catholic converts to Christianity tortured and executed in a two-year period as he was reacting against European incursion into Africa. These were not travelling missionaries, they were African-born believers whose faith even to death transformed what is now Uganda. Those African believers showed true love for those who were torturing and killing them and so planted the seeds for a strong Anglican church long that has long been under indigenous ministry, such that there are far more Anglicans in Africa than there are in the Church of England. Even Mwanga, who was exiled in 1899, would be baptized into the Anglican Church in the Seychelles, dying a Christian in 1903 at the age of 35.

The Church requires of its saints "evidence of heroic faith, love, goodness of life, service to others for Christ's sake, and devotion". We certainly see these markers in Hannington's life. Yet, we also see that Ambrose Bierce has a point. To see the bishop as a saint, we might just have to squint at the ways he and his companions, with the aid of the Church Missionary Society using the martyrs to win public support, led to Buganda becoming a British protectorate. They longed to share the Good News of God's love and grace and in so doing brought the yoke of colonialism with what was to be freedom and new life in Christ. Even their capture and deaths were not without complication; evidence is clear that Hannington had been warned of the political danger in forging a highland route to Kenya. Mwanga wanted to push back against European incursion into his kingdom. James Hannington's might have wanted to serve Jesus, but his death certainly benefitted English expansion.

So when we look for saints, we find that their lives are complicated. Hailed in her lifetime as a living saint, some were troubled to learn that Mother Teresa of Calcutta had told her spiritual director that she spent most of the years of her ministry in deep doubt, including about the existence of God. This was discovered through sixty-six years of correspondence between Mother Teresa and her spiritual confidants which came to light after her death.

The publication of the correspondence was not intended to mar her international reputation; those seeking her sainthood wanted to present the nun as she really was, serious doubts and all. In accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, Teresa proclaimed to the world that she accepted the award in the name of the poor: “And through this award and through all of us gathered here together, we are wanting to proclaim the good news to the poor that God loves them, that we love them, that they are somebody to us, that they too have been created by the same loving hand of God, to love and to be loved.” This was very much like Jesus – you could almost imagine reading that in St. Luke’s Gospel. Yet months earlier, she wrote to a confidant, “Jesus has a very special love for you. As for me, the silence and emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear.” To accept Mother Teresa as a saint is to take her doubts and all as one who loved the poor as Jesus taught, even when she didn’t feel God’s presence. This is perhaps why the snarky definition offered by Ambrose Bierce proves oddly accurate and soundly scriptural. “A dead sinner, revised and edited.” We find the same in scripture and our own lives. All of us are sinners. Not one of us is pure. Though we never knew him, we can know that James Hannington was a sinner. The same holds for Mother Teresa, though her doubts were not themselves sin. We just know that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. What makes someone a saint is not that they are holy, but that God is holy. Every one of us in baptism is buried with Christ in his death to rise with him in resurrection. We are all called to be dead to sin and alive to God. We are all called to be saints—dead sinners revised and edited by the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus. Dead sinners that we are, we too find our own unique vocation as James Hannington and Mother Teresa did. We are to serve Christ by serving others, by loving God and loving our neighbours as ourselves. We are to go out from our worship so nurtured by the presence of our Lord in Word and Sacrament that this community is changed, even in a small way, and the world with it.

We don’t do any of these actions in order to earn or deserve God’s grace and love, we already have that and it is given to us freely. Instead, we love our neighbours as ourselves in response to that love, expecting nothing in return as God has given us everything. There are many other dead sinners who need to know that God loves them as they are, but would like to work on revising and editing. That work of redemption will continue until that day when we join Simon, Jude, Martin, James and Teresa and all the saints. Because we don’t define saints. God does. And the Holy Trinity wishes that all would gather around the heavenly throne in that saintly chorus, even you and me. ***Alastair France – 02.11.25***