St Paul Kinross All Saints Day 021114

One of my friends on Facebook announced the death of his elderly mother this week. He said that she ‘has now gone on before us’ And I was reminded how easily we lose the awareness that we are ‘surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses’ When I said a few words at the celebration of the 25th Wedding Anniversary of my sister and husband last weekend, I found myself saying that our parents are no longer with us – but undoubtedly with us in spirit.

There are several strands to All Saints Day. One of them is that sense of the continuing presence of those whom we have loved and lost. In societies with a deep religious awareness, one is constantly reminded of that. When I comforted the bereaved and prepared for funerals as a Rector in Ireland, my parishioners would constantly remind me of their belief that members of their families were now being reunited – that the person who had died was now safe or free from pain. The loss was real – but so was the sense of abiding presence.

It’s part of our lives as well – most obviously when we gather for the Eucharist – and in the Prayer of Thanksgiving we say, ‘Therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven .. ‘ We are reminding ourselves that our worship is part of the worship of the countless throng which worships round the throne of God – as our reading from Revelation puts it, ‘a great multitude that no one could count from every people and nation and kindred and tribe ….’

But then there is that other strand which is about saints. Most obviously we think of that as being about the ‘greats’ of faith – the people who have been inspirational to us and others. In that group, I shall always remember the experience of being an impressionable teenager sitting on plane about to take off from Belfast with an empty seat beside me – and then suddenly Mother Theresa sat down beside me and we talked for an hour. And I expect that David shares my experience of the privilege of getting to know Archbishop Rowan Williams a bit – and gradually coming to understand that he could open doors and windows in the soul – ones which I didn’t even know were there. Those saintly people are inspirational because they seem less confused, less blurred, more single-minded in their focus on God than we can ever hope to be.

But actually saints are everywhere – indeed St Paul uses the term interchangeably with Christian and believer. So that means you and me – the saints of God

I’m turning over in my mind a letter to the adult children or somebody in my former parish who died suddenly and before her time. And I’ll say to them how much I admired and respected the way she continued to care for their father through problems and challenges which would have defeated most people. In that sense, she and many like her – who care beyond measure or reason, who forgive beyond measure or reason, who love without boundaries … are saints .. mostly unrecognised and unthanked. And perhaps the more saintly because of that.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives us a list – not a list of things we ought to do. But a list of things which people do which mean that they are blessed of God. But of course what he says is unreasonable – because our world doesn’t work like that. In our world, those who mourn are eventually told to pull themselves together, the meek just get pushed to one said and the merciful get trodden on. So Jesus isn’t just talking about now. Indeed what he says is a daring act of protest against how things are in the world as we experience it. But what Jesus means is that we should look upon the kind of people he mentions – the poor in spirit, the merciful, the peacemakers – look on them with new eyes and so gain entrance to a new world. So we look again and see a new reality coming into being – we see such people as blessed and call them saints – and we say that this is the world to which we belong even as we participate in the task of bringing it about.

So this is a very special day. Our faith is pretty earthbound – maybe even a little flatfooted some of the time. So today reminds us that we worship and rejoice as part of the great cloud of witnesses – and we see through the eye of faith the kingdom life to which Jesus calls us and through which we in turn with all who have been baptised become the saints of God