

Communion of Saints

Readings: Hebrews chapter 11, verse 33 – chapter 12, verse 2; John chapter 14, verses 1 – 3

This weekend the Church celebrates two festivals. All Saints Day and All Souls Day. Both are concerned with the commemoration of those who have died, and it is a pity that the Protestant wing of the Church tends to play down both festivals. Yet our Christian Creed has an article which includes both and more. We say “I believe in the Communion of Saints”. And that belief has a very practical consequence.

I begin with a personal experience. 60 years ago I arrived in England to start my theological training at Richmond College. I shall never forget that first day. The college is at the top of Richmond hill and it has a long, winding driveway. Suddenly you turn a corner and are confronted by a massive greystone building. Two huge wooden doors formed the entrance and they opened up into a great entrance hall. At the far end there was a life-sized statue of John Wesley, father of Methodism. And just to make sure that we didn't get too carried away the 2nd year students had draped his shoulders with rolls of toilet paper and hung a large sign around his neck. “Abandon hope all ye who enter here”. The flanking walls were covered in honours boards with the names of Richmond men who had gone as missionaries overseas after their training. Alongside their names were the dates when they left Richmond and the dates they died. I looked at the West Africa board. The first 17 names were telling a sobering and inspiring story. Not one of them had lasted more than a year in West Africa. All had died of blackwater fever. Yet still others went knowing full well the likely consequences. And, to this day, whenever I sing; “For all the saints who from their labours rest” I get a mental picture of those boards and I see those names and I am inspired and challenged and humbled. **The Communion of Saints.**

And when we share in Holy Communion, part of the great Thanksgiving Prayer has us all saying; “*Therefore with angels and all the choirs of heaven we join in the triumphant hymn; Holy, holy, holy Lord...*” I can identify with that.

The Communion of Saints has a double reference. It refers to that fellowship we have with other Christians in the here and now. And it refers to that fellowship we have with those who have gone before.

The first is easy to understand. Our fellowship with other Christians in the here and now. You cannot over-exaggerate this. Virtually all I know of God and the Christian Faith has come through others. It began with a young peoples' club in my home Church. Three years in theological college had a lasting influence. Five years working amongst the Batonga people in the Zambezi Valley provided insights I can never forget. And every congregation I have ever had has nurtured and deepened my faith. The Communion of Saints is not merely a phrase in the Creed to be believed – it is something to be experienced.

The second dimension is more difficult to understand. It is our fellowship with those who have gone before. It is our Christian Faith that death is not the end of our journey but rather a milestone along the road of our journey into God. We do not cease to be but live on in another dimension of being. And I am not prepared to speculate beyond that affirmation. As the hymn says:

*“My knowledge of that life is small; the eye of faith is dim;
but 'tis enough that Christ knows all, and I shall be with him.*”

Least of all do I know how those who live on impact upon this life of ours. But I, for one, find comfort and encouragement in the words that we read from the **Letter to the Hebrews** in the New Testament. The writer uses an analogy drawn from the Roman Games – the forerunner of our Olympics. He imagines a vast stadium crammed to the rafters with spectators. And, on the athletics track the runners engaged in a long distance race. They are urged on to greater effort by the shout

of thousands of spectators yelling encouragement. With that image in mind the author of Hebrews writes;

“Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses let us run with endurance the race that is set before us”.

And that cloud of witnesses is very real to me. The honours boards on the wall of Richmond College are not just names of Christians long since dead. They are amongst the cloud of witnesses that urge me on. So too are St Augustine and Martin Luther and John Wesley. So too are others completely unknown and unsung. Enoch Chidemo was an African evangelist who was posted to an isolated village in the Zambezi Valley and began to work amongst the Batonga people. He built his own mud house; bullied the Batonga men to construct a makeshift classroom, travelled around on a battered bicycle and held a service in the classroom every Sunday. Often he was the only member of the congregation. He stuck it out and there is a Church and congregation there today. Enoch is amongst the cloud of witnesses too.

“Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses let us run with endurance the race that is set before us looking to Jesus, the Pioneer and Perfecter of our faith.”