

Sermon - For all the saints

Based on the two hymns: 'For all the saints'

For all the saints [William Marshall Howe (1823-97) alt. © The Australian Hymn Book Company Pty Ltd, 1999]

1. For all the saints who from their labours rest,
 who to the world their Lord by faith confessed,
 your name, O Jesus, be for ever blessed.
 Hallelujah, hallelujah!
2. You were their rock, their fortress and their might,
 you were their captain in the well fought fight,
 in deepest darkness still their one true light.
 Hallelujah, hallelujah!
3. So may your servants, faithful, true and bold,
 fight as the saints who nobly fought of old,
 and win, with them, the victor's crown of gold.
 Hallelujah, hallelujah!
4. O blest communion, fellowship divine!
 We feebly struggle, they in glory shine,
 all yours, all joined in unity divine.
 Hallelujah, hallelujah!
5. And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long,
 steals on the ear the distant triumph song,
 and hearts are brave again, and arms are strong.
 Hallelujah, hallelujah!
6. The golden evening brightens in the west;
 soon, soon to faithful warriors comes their rest,
 the peaceful calm of paradise the blest.
 Hallelujah, hallelujah!
7. But see, there breaks a yet more glorious day;
 the saints triumphant rise in bright array;
 the King of glory passes on his way.
 Hallelujah, hallelujah!
8. From earth's wide bounds and ocean's farthest shore,
 through heaven's gate the holy people pour;
 the Three-in-One for ever they adore.
 Hallelujah, hallelujah!

For all the saints [John Bell (b. 1949) & Graham Maule (b. 1958) © Wild Goose Resource Group, 1989]

1. For all the saints who showed your love
 in how they lived and where they moved,
 for mindful women, caring men,
 accept our gratitude again.
2. For all the saints who loved your name,
 whose faith increased the Saviour's fame,
 who sang your songs and shared your word,
 accept our gratitude, good Lord.
3. For all the saints who named your will,
 and saw your kingdom coming still
 through selfless protest, prayer and praise,
 accept the gratitude we raise.
4. Bless all whose will or name or love
 reflects the grace of heaven above.
 Though unacclaimed by earthly powers,
 your life through theirs has hallowed ours.

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Militant and triumphant

- The traditional hymn, 'For all the saints', was composed by the Anglican Canon William Howe in 1864.
- It was written in the context of the established Church of England, which was organisationally in step with a nation that was conquering and claiming territories in a global expansion of empire.
- The British were bent on exporting their supposedly superior culture, and this included encouraging missionaries to endure all kinds of deprivations as they eagerly sought to convert the heathen to the Christian faith.
- And so this stirring hymn employs words such as 'fortress', 'Captain', 'warriors', and 'fight'; of hearts being brave and arms being strong.
- We are reminded of St Paul encouraging us to 'fight the good fight', and of missionaries facing physical assault, and deprivation of all kinds.
- One needed courage, strength, and a firm conviction in the cause one was committed to.
- One of my grandfathers was a missionary in East Africa, and he had to carry a gun for protection against wild animals.
- After he had returned to England to find himself a wife, he then ensured that she likewise had a pearl-handled revolver when he took her back to 'darkest Africa' with him.
- The Church of England saw itself emphatically as the Church Militant upon earth, in communion with the Church Triumphant in heaven.
- Upon our own death, after a lifetime of labouring in the service of our Captain, we each could look forward to following the King of glory through the gates of pearl, and enjoying the peaceful calm of paradise.

A kingdom in the making

- There is a contemporary hymn, also starting with the words 'For all the saints'.
- We will be singing this as a more contemplative hymn during the offertory.
- Written in the 1980s by John Bell and Graham Maule in the Iona Community on that island off the west coast of Scotland, it has a radically different theological focus.
- John Bell describes his hymns as being "Scottish, incarnational, and biblical."
- He is not obliging other Christians to be Scottish in turn, but writes intentionally from the perspective of his culture for the people of his culture, so that the hymn "is rooted very firmly in the culture we are a part of."
- He regards his hymns as being "incarnational [in that] we mean that the text speaks of a Gospel that is wedded to time, place, and people."
- And he and Graham Maule consider their hymn-writing to be "biblical [because]... while not all our materials directly quote scripture, it is the revelation of God through scripture and the breadth of human emotions offered to God in the psalms which guide our thinking." (*Hawn, 215*)*
- While Canon Howe's hymn is focused on the church militant upon earth and triumphant in heaven, Bell and Maule's hymn is focused on the love and actions of saints among us, making God's kingdom manifest here and now.
- They refer to saints who 'showed your love', 'loved your name', and 'named your will'.
- And the whole hymn is written not as a descriptive glorification of Jesus through those who fight in his name, but as a prayer to the Lord - a prayer of thanksgiving and blessing for those who were 'mindful women [and] caring men', 'who sang your songs and shared your word', and who enacted God's kingdom 'through selfless protest, prayer and praise'.

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- I suggest that as stirring as Canon Howe's hymn is, Bell and Maule's hymn uses words that are more relatable to us, as we remember and give thanks for those who have nurtured us and our communities in the love of our Lord.

Battling sin

- However, don't assume that I have dismissed the traditional hymn, and its language of doing battle.
- Personally I think that its wording is as relevant as ever: it is the context of its relevance that has changed.
- We are no longer a colony of an empire-building nation, and so in that sense we do not need to regard ourselves as warriors following our Captain.
- But the battle against sin, against the temptation of sin and its consequences, should be real and relevant for us.
- I'll remind you that a simple working definition of sin is anything that comes between us and God - that damages or disrupts the relationship that God wants to have with each person.

- And Jesus did battle with sin and the consequences of people enacting such damage and disruption.
- Whenever he encountered someone who was unwell in body, mind or spirit, he would first pronounce their sins forgiven - that is, he would let them know that whatever was damaging or disrupting their relationship with God had been removed, and that their relationship with God was restored.
- When they believed and accepted this forgiveness of sin, they would then be in a position where they were open to restoration of wholeness and well-being.
- Jesus could effectively channel God's Spirit of love and life, and the transformation of healing would then become manifest.
- But this healing process would invariably start with Jesus engaging in spiritual battle, and overcoming whatever was unloving, whatever was light-quenching, whatever was life-draining, for that person.
- Sometimes this was perceived as something malevolent - as demons or unclean spirits.
- Sometimes this was seen as a consequence of the prejudice or judgement of others, that made people feel worth-less or sin-full.
- Sometimes - and this is where Jesus really got worked up - it was a consequence of religious leaders putting obstacles in the way of people knowing and experiencing God's love and compassion.
- And over and over again, Jesus battled minds which limited God, and which could only engage with God and with God's desire in narrow prescriptive ways.

Countering personal and systemic evil

- The saints that John Bell and Graham Maule refer to in their hymn, are those who continue this ministry of countering and overcoming sin and evil, by enacting God's love, mercy, forgiveness, and generosity of heart.
- I suggest that there is also a place for the saints that Canon Howe describes in his hymn, where spiritual warriors intentionally ask God to make their hearts brave and their arms strong, as they battle less personal forces.
- By less personal, I mean those aspects of organisations, communities, and society which damage and disrupt the relationship between people and God.
- When one person treats another unkindly and unjustly, then the evil that is perpetrated is personal, and the saints who respond to both the perpetrator and the abused person with love make God's kingdom real at a personal level.

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- However, when a group of people, as an organisation or as dominant faction in a community, collectively treat others unkindly and unjustly, then the evil that is perpetrated is, in a sense, impersonal.
- The saints who respond to these situations are then engaged in battle against systemic evil, and this is often enormously costly.
- For such saints, it can be very helpful to perceive Jesus as ‘their captain in the well fought fight, in deepest darkness still their one true light.’
- It can be a great comfort in their awareness of how ‘feebly [they] struggle’ that those whose struggle in this world is over - that ‘they in glory shine, [and together are] all yours, all joined in unity divine’.
- When such saints grow weary of struggling and battling against the systemic evil perpetrated by communities and organisations, and they hear in their minds and hearts again Jesus’ triumph over death, then their ‘hearts are [made] brave again, and arms [made] strong’, and they are renewed in their determination to fight for God’s love and compassion and peace to replace the systemic evil they see and abhor.

Being saints

- Saints come in all forms, from those who battle injustice, to those who show kindness, to those whose faith in God inspires others.
- Today we give thanks for all the different saints in their wonderful diversity, from those we read about in the Bible or other books, to those we have encountered in our own lives.
- We give thanks for them all, and ask God so to teach, lead and encourage us, that we in turn may be saints like those who have gone before us.

* C. Michael Hawn. *Gather Into One: Praying and Singing Globally* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 2003)