

## **St Stephen's**

**5<sup>th</sup> November 2017 - All Saints**

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I read a book called X platoon about a young man who always wanted to be a soldier. He wanted to be in the elite Parachute Regiment and joined up when he was 16 having trained very hard to make sure he could pass the physical. When he became a paratrooper he found out about a group called X Platoon which was not officially part of the British Army. It was an elite group and he wanted to be part of that. He and others went into the selection process to get into X platoon. The people on the selection process came from the Paras, the Royal Marines and the SAS. They were already part of the army elite forces but strived to become members of X platoon. Most of them, even though in elite regiments were unable to pass the endurance tests for selection.

Obviously, there are some people who would never join the army just as there are some who will never be in the church. In the army, all are called to serve and are called soldiers. Also, everyone in the church is called to serve the Lord, and is called a saint. But within the church there are some who are recognised as the elite members of the church. In All Saints Tide we think of saints who are examples for us to follow and emulate. As Christians we are called to fight against sin, the world and the Devil. What kind of Christian soldier do you want to be? Do you want to be the best you can?

Every saint was seeking to follow Jesus perfectly. The Collect says, "Grant us grace so to follow your Blessed Saints in all virtuous and godly living that we may come to those inexpressible joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you." Do we truly love God? In our reading from Matthew the final verses say, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven. Those who hold fast to Christ regardless of the lies and persecutions they face will be rewarded in heaven. In our reading from Revelation there is a description of the worship of both saints and angels in Heaven. They proclaim loudly, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the lamb.'

We get to heaven because of God's initiative in sending His Son Jesus to be the sacrificial lamb who is slain so that we can receive forgiveness and through God's mercy and grace enjoy heaven forever. The lamb of course echoes the sacrificial lamb of the Passover. Many biblical references seem strange to modern ears which is why we may end up ridiculed and persecuted. Those saints who worship God in heaven

are described as being robed in white. 'They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb.' That sounds ridiculous to many. If you put cloth into blood it would be red not white. But the obvious meaning is the blood of Jesus is what cleanses us and purifies us from sin. Therefore, we appear in white robes symbolising that we are made pure in Christ.

The reading from the Sermon on the Mount shows that to be a saint is impossible without the grace of God. A saint is a sinner who keeps on trying and understands the need of God's forgiveness whenever they fail. God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit mean that any of us can continue striving for holiness and saintliness. During our earthly life, from the moment of our baptism, the Spirit is at war with the flesh. We are called to fight against the world and the devil, but we can only win that fight when we first conquer ourselves.

Saints in the past have given their testimony of what it means to pursue holiness. They have spoken of three things which are: Purgation, Illumination, and Union. Illumination is when God gives a motivating vision to give us the desire to be with God in Heaven. Union is that unity with God which we will have in Heaven. We can have a foretaste of that union in our earthly life. Illumination and Union are both the result of and the ongoing motivation for Purgation. Purgation is when we know what's wrong with us and we cooperate with God's Spirit to purge sinful thoughts and action from ourselves. This is being blessed because we are poor in spirit. We are not proud but humble enough to know our need of God. It was pride which led some of the angels to become devils and humility which enables saints to worship with the angels in Heaven.

St Augustine said, 'No one reaches the kingdom of heaven except by humility.' St Vincent De Paul said, 'Our business is to gain heaven; everything else is a waste of time.' St Teresa of Lisieux wanted, from childhood, to be a saint. During her lifetime the lift or elevator was invented. Many saints have spoken about the Ascent to Heaven. Teresa said, 'It is your arms Jesus which are the elevator to carry me to heaven.' She knew her need of ongoing grace to be a saint.

This may seem a strange way to end a sermon, but I want you all to follow the example of the saints. So, I encourage you to pray to the Lord. Ask Jesus to make you a saint. After all, only He can do it.

Amen.