

Saints and How to Be Them

All Saints' Sunday. November 6, 2011. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance. The Rev'd Jerome H. Colegrove.

The problem with saints is that we are them.

Each one of us Christians, you and me, are saints. Saint means someone who has been made holy, and for Christians that is something God does by means of his free gift of grace, especially through the sacrament of baptism. It is not something that we do for ourselves.

But what we do should show what God has done for us. There should be a detectable transformation, a noticeable effect, a measurable difference between an unsanctified person and one who has been made part of the Body of Christ. For that is what the grace that comes through baptism does. All of us saints are members of the Body of Christ.

The body should be coordinated by its head, right? Well, unlike the organs that make up our own bodies, the people who make up the parts of the body of Christ on earth get to decide whether or not they will pay attention to the Coordinator. Some saints get more and more converted into people who pay good attention to God; others, alas, drift more and more into paying not much attention at all to God.

That explains why some saints look a lot more transformed than

others. The ones that seem to set the best example of holiness sometimes get the formal title of Saint, that is, Saint-with-a-capital-S. I say “sometimes” because some really good examples of holiness never get the wide notice of, say, Mother Theresa or C. S. Lewis—both of whom are widely regarded as saints and are officially accorded saintly status within their branches of the church. Mother Theresa has been beatified, that is, she is just short of being fully and officially declared a saint, in the Roman Catholic branch of the Church. C. S. Lewis has been given a feast day (November 22) on the calendar of our Episcopal branch of the Church.

We look at really good organizers of charity like Mother Theresa, and we look at really smart teachers like C. S. Lewis, and we say, what on earth is the point of comparing ourselves with people like that? Well, the point is not for us to become exactly like them, and especially it is not for us to be discouraged because we’re not yet as holy as they are. The point is to remember who we are already and to find a bit more encouragement in the lifelong process of becoming as holy as Jesus. Not as holy as those saints were (and are); as holy as Jesus.

Because, you see, the conspicuous holy folk we call Saints-with-a-capital-S are always the people who are most conscious of how far they have to go to become utterly like Jesus. Utterly and tirelessly loving, like Jesus. Utterly devoted to saying and doing the right thing, like Jesus. Utterly constant in paying attention to the Heavenly Father, like Jesus. When you read or hear what the great saints say, you notice right away how far they know they have to go

to reach perfection.

And yet, along with discipline and difficulty, there is plenty of joy in the journey, as those saints know it and speak about it. Because it's not about how far we get; it's about never giving up. It's about walking the road of Heaven one step at a time for all the minutes we get on earth to keep walking. We can never walk all the way to Heaven because, you see, Heaven has already come to us; the Master of the Universe resides in our baptized souls. We are, as the expression goes, saved, so holiness is not about saving ourselves. Our task is not to get to heaven but to make heaven's values real on earth and to celebrate them, every chance we get. God's grace can make every step we take part of a dance of joy and a witness to God's love. The better attention we pay to God, the more God's grace will lift our feet and aim us in the right direction.

How do we pay attention to God? Through the regular reading of Holy Scripture as God's voice to our soul; through regular prayer as the direct link between us and God; and through holy conversation.

Let me say a bit more about holy conversation, because it often gets less attention than prayer and reading Scripture, and yet it is so important in Christian living. We can have conversations with living people in which God's wisdom speaks to us (yes, and sometimes even through us to others). And we can have conversations with people who have died but who live on in this world of time and space through books, as (famously) in the case of C. S. Lewis. And should we encounter thorny questions we have trouble resolving, or resistance we have trouble overcoming, part of

our holy conversation can include finding someone who has a special ministry of helping people sort out how to pay attention to God. God has made sure that among his saints there are people who have the gifts of listening carefully and giving wise counsel. Sometimes (but not always!) these people are ordained, and often they have special training in providing spiritual guidance.

The Feast of All Saints, which we celebrate this Sunday, is the day to pay attention to our call to pay attention to God. Today we listen for the sound of millions of feet walking—or even dancing—millions of miles for God, one step at a time. This is the day to remember that each step, each single step, makes a difference. This is the day to link arms with the living and the dead in the communion of saints and feel the solidarity of life in Christ. This is the day to remember that God never tires of supporting, guiding and delighting in all his saints—and, sure as sparks fly upward, that includes you and me.