

All Saints. 2018. See the value in those in front of you.

Sometimes I will turn on the TV and just see what is there. Often the answer is not much. There are some shows, though, that I enjoy watching when the moment is right. Not that I would set the schedule of my life around when they are showing but if they happen to be there when I turn the TV on then I enjoy watching. One like that is Antique Roadshow. Do you know the one I mean? People bring items along and experts will let them know what they are and how much they are worth. The monetary value is sometimes very surprising. People find that an odd little piece which had been lying around in the house is worth thousands! But I find the stories and connections more interesting.

People come with some weird and wonderful items. Some of them are very personal. Some of them connect with larger stories, they are part of events or patterns which connect lots of people. Some of those are commemorative items, for example WW1 memorabilia. Some are items which are part of particular eras, like some extraordinary art deco pieces! The value of the items which people bring to share and discuss is not just in how much they may sell for. It is not just in how much they may have cost originally. Even when people find that some piece they have brought may be worth a LOT of money most suggest that they will still hold onto it. When there is a connection with the item then the value is defined in ways beyond what may be seen on the surface.

I think that celebrating the Feast of All Saints can be a bit like coming along to Antique Roadshow. It is not just because when we think of the saints of the church we may think we are considering people and connections from a long time ago. Actually, when we come to this day we also remember people who we have known personally who have died. The people we remember and cherish and hold in this space are not all antiques!

On one level recognising the saints of the church, and recognising and cherishing the people whose lives have touched ours, we are recognising all that God has done in them and through them. We celebrate lives which have brought encouragement, light, joy, peace. We cherish people who have taught and brought about change and stood up for values which are vital for healthy living even at great cost to themselves. We delight in people whose goodness and godliness shines through in ways which help us, and others, to understand life more deeply, comprehensively, richly.

All these things God does in and through holy people, people in ancient times and people in our time, people almost anonymous to us and people deeply, intimately connected with us. Part of the value we celebrate is God's presence in their lives. That is the value anyone can see.

What about to us personally? We may all see the things in the lives of St Francis of Assisi, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Oscar Romero, and so many others. We may all be able to say – they did this, they said that, they taught and revealed these things, they showed these characteristics of rich, deep fulfilling Christian living. We get that. But what do they mean to us personally?

It is when we reflect on what WE have learned and the changes which have come about in our lives through the contact we have had with others, it is then that we move from this sort of celebration being something 'out there' to something 'in here'. In the Antique Roadshow terms I see that as the difference between something having dollar value and having personal value.

The people we remember this day, the people from ancient times or recent times who are recognised as saints of the church, will have some value for us if we just know things about them. But they will have so much more value if we see the way in which their lives change our lives. St Francis, facing his fears and embracing a person who was excluded, an object of fear. Mother Theresa of Calcutta, choosing to reject a position of privilege and to see the face of Jesus in a man dying on the street. Oscar Romero, learning that

he had been part of perpetuating a system of persecution and prejudice by taking an easy path, and choosing speaking out against oppression and corruption even though it cost him his life.

And SO many more. The things I mention about these particular people have changed me. They are ways that God has acted in and through them AND they have changed me and how I live as I have taken those aspects of their lives into mine. I am different as a result of knowing them.

So, as we remember, as we bring people to cherish and consider this day, what is their value for us? Is it in things we recognise about them at which we might nod and say that is nice or good or admirable? Do we look at the lives of others and see only things about them which we celebrate? Or do we look at the lives of those who are around us, as the letter to the Hebrews calls them, in the 'great cloud of witnesses', and what we cherish about them is how OUR lives have been changed by them.

As we hold here in this space the people who are have known and loved and with whom we have shared life, how do we see them? We will see them, hopefully, as whole people, not perfect, but neither were ANY of those who are in the calendar of saints. We may see them as people in whom God was present in particular or extraordinary ways. But an important part of being here is to ask that question about how our lives are better for having known them. How do we live richer lives, more compassionate lives, more faithful lives, lives with deeper openness to others because of the experience we have had of them?

Asking those questions deepens our remembering, shapes our cherishing, enriches our integration of these people into our ongoing living, challenges our attention to all who have gone before us.

It also changes and challenges and transforms how we engage with those who are around us now. I started preparing this sermon on the flight from Adelaide to Brisbane yesterday, but that wasn't going to happen. I got into a conversation with the woman next to me, from Florida, travelling with her husband, exploring Australia. As we talked she revealed that she and her husband are both Jewish, actively involved in their synagogue. We talked about life and faith and responses to the challenges in the modern world, including shootings at schools in USA, one of which happened close to where they live.

Then, as I was waiting for the bus out to Toowoomba, I tried again to work on this sermon. But I go into a conversation with a young woman also waiting for the bus. She has also travelled around and lived in various parts of Australia. As we spoke, and especially after I revealed who I am she spoke about a sense of being called to be in different places.

I could have ignored both of them and got on with the 'work' I needed to do, preparing this sermon for you! But instead I thought that such an approach would have undermined this message about deeper openness to others who are part of our lives. It applies to those who we know intimately as well as those we know fleetingly. I was aware of the spiritual connections. God was in each of those conversations.

As we celebrate All Saints, as we cherish and remember those who have been part of our lives, as we are here together and as we go on with our lives, may God ALWAYS be in all the conversations, the reflections, the learning and the inspiration we find. See the value of those who are around you and those who are in front of you. Those who are here, those who have been part of your life ... and those who will be.

Amen.

Paul Mitchell.