

## Sermon Archive 507

Sunday 3 November, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflection for All Saints Day

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



**Before the sermon**, we sang two verses of "the Journey of Life", which I prefaced with a short introduction, saying: " The hymn, "the Journey of Life", was sung a lot around the time that I first left home to train for ministry. With a tune that bounces along, the text feels like it might fit well in a cartoon about a brave wee pilgrim who's off to fight with lions and not be frightened by hobgoblins. As the text says, on the journey of life there'll be "dangers" on the way. But don't worry! If we just stick with Jesus, the goblins won't get us! I wonder though if the racism will, or the sexism. Or the classism, or the prejudice against those with disabilities. Or the belief that we're all actually too busy to nurture one another. Rather than goblins and lions, are these not more truly the dangers waiting for the saints?

*The journey of life may be easy, may be hard,  
there'll be dangers on the way;  
but with Christ at my side I'll take courage as I ride  
'gainst the foe that would lead me astray.  
Will you ride, ride, ride with the King of kings,  
will you follow my leader true;  
will you shout "hosanna!" to the lowly Son of God,  
who died for me and you?*

**The Bible Reading:** Hebrews 12: 1-3

### **The Sermon**

In October of 1963, I was born into a love already shared by my mother, father and brother. I was never an interloper into what they already had. I was flesh of their flesh, someone around whom they were delighted to extend their love. While Dad had been to church as a boy, and Mum had kneeled by her bed to say her prayers at night as all nominal Anglicans of the 1930s did, neither of them were ticket-carrying members of the Union of God followers. They loved me in a saintly way (if saintly means "with much love"), and watched me with a mix of amusement and trepidation, as (banging my drum) I set out down the road of the holy Son of God who died for me and you (terrible grammar)! Mum was concerned, because the man down the road, with whom she'd had business associations, had a son who'd

gone into the Presbyterian ministry, and had found nothing there but trouble. Dad, on the other hand, by virtue of having grown up in the Irish Presbyterian Church, was kind of confusedly proud. **Proud**, because the calling to ministry was something his community had admired. **Confused**, though, because he probably wondered whether his still-very-young son had the serious stuff required to be a public servant of the Church.

Anyway, neither had any choice other than to wave goodbye as I drove off - down to Dunedin to take up my preparations for holy orders within the community of the Saints of God. Knowing me as they did, I imagine they just hoped that I would meet good people along the way.

I want to mention some of those good people. They were all people who, acting in faith, and having some concern for me, and some concern for the community of God, took care in various ways to become part of my journey. "The journey of life may be easy, may be hard; there'll be dangers on the way."

-ooOoo-

The first year of the journey was surprisingly difficult. Now, looking back on it, I'm inclined to think that much of the difficulty was plain old home-sickness for the home in which I'd been nurtured. Without it, I kind of had no bedroom, no familiar place. Also, back at home, I belonged to a church where my trajectory was exciting; I was on my way to ministry. In Dunedin, everyone was on their way to ministry, so I was nothing special. And I remember, on one of my first days of training, being part of a gathering of the ordinands' community, and looking around at them. They were a sad throwing together of woolly jerseys and diffident expressions. Goodness me, one of them needed a walking stick so he didn't fall over. These days, I would search such a group for stories of the miracle of resilience, and proof that "when I'm weak, then I'm strong"! In those days, I just found it depressing. The Saints of God were tawdry.

After some short time of discouragement, I decided that ministry wasn't for me. In order to trigger the formal process of withdrawing from the programme, I had to talk to the staff member assigned as the convenor of my "pastoral group". The staff member was Frank Nichol, who on my first day of observing the tawdry, was the saint of God who needed the walking stick to stop him from falling. Two years earlier, Frank had had a severe stroke, and when I dismissed him as needing a stick, he was in fact was engaged in a heroic experiment of coming back to work, so that people like me could benefit from his most worthy heart and mind.

Anyway, Frank listened to my story, then wrote me a letter. In the letter he acknowledged that although I might never enter ministry, he hoped that the riches of having studying theology would stay with me always, and that a less

conventional faith would see me through a life that was engaging, responsible and fun.

Two other saints of Dunedin. In a pastoral theology class, while we were discussing what a minister might or might not do, I had spoken of ministers as if we all were "he". Sarah Mitchell pointed out to me that some ministers were not "he", but "she". At the time, I took offense at being corrected on a matter not on the table. We weren't talking about sexism. We were talking about . . . about . . . , well about something else. I did not consider Sarah to have been one of the Saints of God - but in calling me to open my eyes and see other people, she was.

Some other time, I greeted Asora Amosa, a brother in ordination, with an innocent Palagi "hi". Asora replied with a most pronounced "Talofa, Matthew". Getting that he was challenging my mono-culturalism, I was irritated that my warm greeting had become a bomb exploded. I did not consider Asora at that time to be one of the saints of God - but in calling me to grow, he was.

In my first parish, Iona Church in Blockhouse Bay, the Session Clerk was a man called Frank Thompson. He told me, when I arrived at Iona, that had I been a woman, he would have stepped down as Session Clerk. He didn't believe that women should serve the saints as ministers of Sacrament and Word. (Interestingly, when I left three years later, I was replaced by a woman, who had a longer, more positive and productive ministry than I'd had - and Frank had supported her fully until he died from a sudden heart attack. Right until the time of his death, it seems that Frank's vision of the Saints of God was broadening.) At the time that Frank was appalling me by not taking women seriously, I was kind of appalling the angels (who know our thoughts) by dismissing him as an uneducated person. He was a glazier from Glasgow who'd left school early and got himself lots of tattoos - and in those days, tattoos spoke of socio-economic gradations. He dismissed some of the saints (in the direction of all women), while I did exactly the same towards him. (There'll be dangers on the way!)

Frank supported me, even though I was very green and close to useless in ministry. Month by month he met with me to prepare our Session agenda. Sunday by Sunday he met with me before church to pray with me that my mind, heart and voice would find clarity. Then, with him carrying the Bible to the lectern, we went out the door into church, to lead the people of God in worship. He clearly cared for his church. I think he also, **because** he cared for the church, felt he had a duty of care for me. In that care, he broadened my understanding of the wide nature of the saints of God.

In my second parish, there were many saints, but I didn't really notice them, because I was too busy being simple and happy. In my third parish, where I

certainly wasn't being simple and happy, I know that there **were** some saints, but I never really let them "walk with me". And so I sank.

-ooOoo-

Enough of the journey of life among the saints! I'm now back at home with my mother, brother and sister - the non-saints who were part of the love that enfolded me at the start. Dad is not there, because he's just died. Because I have no emotional capacity to conduct his funeral, we need one of the saints of God to help us. I'm wracking my brain for people who might be able to help us. It's been fourteen years since I ministered in Auckland, so had friends in ministry in Auckland. The only one I can think of is Fakaofu Kaio, who having been my neighbour on the North Shore, now is the minister at Onehunga Cooperating Parish. The trouble is that he's also currently the Moderator of the General Assembly, and so is super-busy. Too busy being important to be within our reach. And isn't that in keeping with how we assess the saints of God? People who now are no longer really like us - somehow removed. Something to do with stained glass and haloes! Well, I asked Fakaofu if he would bury my father, and he said "yes".

-ooOoo-

What's the long a short of this rambling reflection?

Well, the **short** is that many of the saints are people whom I have dismissed because they are grey, or disabled, or women, or Pasifika (or Māori or Chinese or Filipino), or not university educated, or too busy, or more celebrated than me. I owe much of God's nurturing to those I first missed seeing. I've been a bigoted man of limited vision. I've been looking for the wrong things - things other than the presence in them of the Spirit of the Lord of the Journey of Life. That's the short.

The **long**, the **very** long, is that all through history, God has been gifting those on the journey of life with people who are "**present**", with people who listen and sometimes speak, with people who make time, give time - either for our good and growth, or for the integrity, good and growth of the church in which we grow. The **long**, very long, is that we are part of a great cloud of witnesses, not of our making, but who are very much God's gift. The gift is diverse. It's surprising. It's something within which we are nurtured and grow.

Happy All Saints Day to you. We keep a moment of quiet.

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