

Jesus answered: You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength, and you must love your neighbour as yourself. In the Name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

The problem with categorising and naming saints is that we may try to be like them, instead of finding out precisely where **our sainthood lies**. Which is why I rather like these words of the Orthodox Theologian Berdyaev about saints

“We need a multitude of modern saints, people capable of taking upon themselves the burden of this complex world”

If I think of the saints I have met – present company excepted of course – it is clear they cannot be standardised. One was a teetotal shepherd living in a simple cob cottage, whom I met in my Devon childhood, and who in addition to shepherding sheep shepherded me, most kids she met, and most adults in any kind of need, all taken under her compassionate, strong and tolerant wing. Another was an Oxford academic priest who in his 40s turned hermit to live in the most austere circumstances in a wooden henhouse at the heart of a poor Scottish mining community, who nevertheless seemed to laugh and joke most of the time and had me in stitches. A third saint was a bohemian author and feminist campaigner who while she certainly cared for people also enjoyed the good life to the full where she lived in a comfortable flat in the Ladbroke Grove area of London. They couldn't be more different people, but they shared what Jesus was talking about in relation to the two great commandments and so helped me understand them.

They shared first a sort of thorough dedication to the search for God. One through simple but wholehearted Methodism, one through a quest to know the mind of God in his communication of Systematic Theology, and one through worship not only in her local parish church but also in all sorts of experimental groups working for women's ordination. It would be absolutely impossible to imagine any of them without their faith, yet their faith was expressed so very differently!

Jesus says we are to love the Lord our God, utterly, with our whole being and with all our energy and intention. That sounds really difficult – how do you love that which is utterly beyond our comprehension – unless we can admit that at the heart of our love of God can be our full human longing and desire for what

God may bring us by her presence – healing, forgiveness, consolation, challenge.

Roland Walls, the academic turned hermit who is one of my saints longed for the reconciliation of God to be made real – between parts of himself, between Christian denominations, between rich and poor. He set up a tiny order, the Order of the Transfiguration, at Rosslyn, in Scotland to dedicate his life to this longing. The hallmark of his order was the wearing of a blanket as a habit – just a rough wool blanket with a hole for the head. When I first saw him get off a train to meet me I thought he was a tramp! And his particular personal gift was Joy – its all for joy he would say and giggle in the middle of some lengthy lecture or detailed sermon – trying to puncture our thirst for status, our thirst for wealth, our thirst for being right, which he thought were utterly ridiculous ideas to have anywhere near the Church of God. His longing for the reconciliation of God, which he pursued with heart and mind and soul and strength, turned to joy, to laughter.

What is our heartfelt longing for God? What do we urgently desire God to bring to us?

Jesus then says we are to love ourselves! Now there's a difficult idea, for me at least, and I suspect for some of you! My second saint, the author Monica Furlong, knew how hard most of us find it to love ourselves. So, she would greet me at the door of her flat where I went for spiritual direction – with "Have a glass of sherry, sweetie". The same session would end with scrambled eggs and cream and smoked salmon, and sometimes a glass of champagne, and a warning to look in the dress shop on the corner on my way home – there was something which would just suit me! Because Monica could love herself she could pour that love away in the compassion and wisdom of her novel writing but also into the lives of all sorts of odd bods who were finding life difficult. I remember being amazed to find that this flamboyant woman, writing to deadlines, frustrated when bored, regularly had to tea a person at St Martin in the Fields where I worked who was very ill, quite disreputable, argumentative, on the breadline, written off by most as a nuisance, but with quite a fine brain which she honoured by her regular meetings with him to talk. She knew how dangerously self-punishing Christianity can become, in the hands of those of us who blame ourselves for everything. She was more interested in how long were my holidays to be this year, than how often I prayed. Sometimes I got frustrated but I got it in the end! – she was teaching

me to love myself and didn't think very much could change in the way of my loving God until I did.

I wonder, do we love ourselves as Jesus commanded us to do?

Jesus said we are to love our neighbour. The Devon village where I grew up was full of people doing simple acts of kindness for each other as a way of surviving poverty, ageing, illness and loss. But even in that environment my shepherd stood out – I will not name her since she would so hate it whereas the other two could cope and loved it when others named them! I used to help her with her work, and whereas I was useless with the sheep – I have hands which if you ask them to do much go in the opposite direction – I was very good at meeting people and counting the cash on her milk round. Her kindness was the sort which coped with emptying a whole ton of coal, un-bagged, out of a bath tub, for a very sick bloke to have a bath when the local doctor ordered him to do so ; she coped with winding clocks in an elderly woman's house only to have to rewind each and every one of them again the next day since none of them worked ; she coped with pulling animals out of flooding fields and children out of neglect. She and indeed that whole village inspired me with the huge importance of the mustard seed, with doing the small acts of mercy and grace which transform people's everyday lives.

When I look back, I am also struck by how unafraid each of my saints was to engage politically in the society around them. OK the shepherd perhaps in the smallest way with creating youth clubs which kept kids out of trouble, but the hermit was able to converse with trades unions , politicians and bishops about the poverty he saw about him, and the author with the great and the good of the Church of England to help create the movement for the ordination of women. They taught me that the personal life thoroughly lived IS political. The love of neighbour may seem small, but it should also engage us in the political life of our local and national community where cynicism and violence in speech and deed need challenge, and where justice and mercy need so badly to flower. To love our neighbour is also to understand and care about our neighbour's context.

Where and how do we love our neighbour?

Then I wonder about us here together – a community of Saints, ALL SAINTS, where does “being church together” fit in? Well, I think parish churches are

meant to be mustard seed-beds – places where saints can grow and develop in the love of God, the love of self, and the love of neighbour. The influential saints of Christian history and those who shaped our lives learned their faith somewhere, and some, young or old, will start right here in this seed-bed!

So, let us pause for a moment to thank God for the seed-beds of sainthood we have known, and the saints who have formed us, and let us pray,

Some words of Thomas Merton:

The pale flowers of the dogwood outside this window are saints.

The little yellow flowers that nobody notices on the edge of that road are saints

Looking up into the face of God.

The leaf has its own texture and its own pattern of veins and its own holy shape,

And the bass and the trout hiding in the deep pools of the river

Are canonised by their beauty and their strength

The forms and individual characters of living and growing things

Of inanimate beings, of animals and flowers and all nature,

Constitute their holiness in the sight of God.

Their inscape is their sanctity

It is the imprint of his wisdom and his reality in them.

The lakes hidden among the hills are saints

And the sea too is a saint who praises God without interruption

In her majestic dance.

The great gashed half-naked mountain is another of God's saints.

There is no other like him.

He is alone in his own character;

Nothing else in the world ever did or ever will imitate God in quite the same way.

That is his sanctity.

But what about you? What about me?

Amen