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Trinity 21

Lessons : Daniel 2.1-11,25-48; **Revelation 7.9-17.**

Preached at evensong in Trinity College Chapel, Cambridge. 05.xi.06

'Becoming the saints we are'

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.

Amen.

The commentary, lying on my desk, suggested, the Book of Revelation's literary form makes it impenetrable to many modern readers. That brought me little comfort. Your facial expressions, as this evening's second lesson was read, have not obviously challenged the commentary's suggestion. Little comfort there either. Your Dean has invited me to preach twice. I have accepted twice. And on both occasions the second lesson has been from the book of Revelation. Should he ever invite me to preach again, before I accept, I really must check what the lessons are.

How then to begin, even partially, to penetrate this evening's second lesson? Begin, I suggest, by remembering what Tuesday evening was – Hallowe'en, a quiet night in college, I suspect. Continue by recalling what Wednesday was – All Saints' Day. And then begin to see this evening's lesson through the eyes of Hallowe'en and the feast of All Saints. For this evening's lesson is, at least in part, about who the saints are, and, by implication, how even we may become saintly.

For St John the Divine at least, saints are not saints as a result of being of this particular nationality or of that particular racial origin. For, for him, they were and are

a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues [Revel.7.9].

Nor, for him were the saints such as a result of their being members of a particular society or political structure. At the time of John's writing the ideology of the *pax Romana* was vigorously promoted. Rome, it was argued, had given the world peace and prosperity. It had given individuals status and markets value. It was its peoples' hope and it would be its citizens' security. But, as John the Divine listened, the innumerable multitude of his vision cried out with a loud voice,

Salvation belongs to our God, who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb [Revel.7.10].

Salvation, well-being in all its senses, the multitude asserted, salvation, well-being, in this world and in the next, comes from God, and not from Rome, however benign a ruler Rome may be. Salvation, saintliness, is the gift of God, the all holy One, and not of a Caesar, or a synod. Even as early as then there was an inkling that creatures cannot save creatures, that flawed human being cannot make saints, that partial political systems ultimately cannot render themselves impartial, the respecter of none and the champion of all. For only God the Creator can save. Only the all holy One can sanctify. Only the One who is the respecter of none and the champion of all, only the One who is in no one's debt and yet became everyone's servant, the Lord incarnate, can render people respecters of none and champions of all. As a fourth century bishop once asked,

What help can creatures derive from a creature that itself needs salvation? [Athanasius, *ad Adelpum* 8].

So, who are the saints, and how may even we become saintly?

The saints, as one of the elders of John the Divine's vision remarked, are those who

have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb [Revel.7.14].

Let me elaborate. For, if we are to penetrate this literary form, this imagery of saintliness born of sacrifice, we need to say more. John the Divine takes as a

'given' that Christ's sacrificial death is that which makes saints of sinners. Christ's sacrificial death puts the words in the mouths of those newly made people of God, who, day and night, before the throne of God, laud the Lamb, who

will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of living water [Revel.7.17],

who worship God, who

will wipe away every tear from their eyes [Revel.7.17].

John the Divine takes for granted that Christ's life and death has made people saints, has made people God's holy people. For John, Christ's death is a *sine qua non* of people's *being* saints. But for John, Christ's death, Christ's life and death, is also a *sine qua non* of *living* as saints. For Christ's death, at one level, is but the natural culmination of that far more prosaic process of un-selfing, of that day-by-day denying oneself, of that continuous taking up one's cross, of that mundane offering of one's human coinage to be stamped afresh in God's likeness.

Those made saints, in and through Christ's death, were called, in and through Christ's death, to become what they are. Those made saints were called to become saintly. And those made saints were called to become saintly, not only in the church but also in the world, not only for the church but also for the world.

Never were the saints to be detached from the messiness of everyday life. John's saints were to live and die in the compromised and compromising world of the Mediterranean basin. Nor was the stage which these saints were to grace but that of the sanctuary, from whose relative safety they might harangue the messy world beyond. John's saints were to tread the boards of an Ephesus, a centre of worship of the fertility goddess Artemis, and of a Smyrna and a Pergamum, both loyal to the cult of Rome and the emperor.

And, as long as powers opposed to God exercised even limited dominion in such cities, in such a region, these saints were to live saintly lives, there and then. They were to expose and challenge all ungodly powers. They were to encourage others to allow the one, true God to fashion them as saints. They were to nurture them, that they too might live as saints – and always to the end that not some of the world, but that the whole world might join the angelic throng, worshipping God and saying,

Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God, for ever and ever. Amen [Revel.7.12].

Only then would God's will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Nor on this subject is John's voice a lone voice. As an early letter records, saints of the early centuries lived

in their own countries, but only as aliens ... They marry, like everyone else, and they beget children, but they do not cast out their offspring. They share their board with each other, but not their marriage bed. It is true that they are 'in the flesh'; but they do not live 'according to the flesh'. They busy themselves on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven
[*ad Diognetum* 5.5f]

And they lived so, not simply because that was the way of the church, but because that was the way of God, the all-holy One who laid down his life for the sake of the world.

And, I would venture to suggest, those who now would be saints will also live so.

Amen.