

I wonder what comes into your mind when you think of Saints? Perhaps an image of a person in a Stained glass window, maybe with a halo, looking holy. Or perhaps one of those statues, maybe with some candles or a posy of flowers.

We sometimes talk about plaster saints which makes me think of an incident that happened to me a few years ago. At the time I was working in a Church in Kent, working as a lay Parish Assistant just before I went off to Theological college. The Church I was working in at the time had some very high windows and each one had a light under it. When the bulbs went there was no-one else who was willing to climb up and change them, so it was me who ended up climbing the ladder each time a bulb needed replacing.

On one occasion I made it safely back to the ground only to pick up the ladder and feel it pivot over my head. The rungs of the ladder went either side of my head, one of them snapping one of my front teeth in half. I was just pondering this as I heard a huge crash behind me. I turned around, forgetting my tooth for a moment, to see that the end of the ladder had come down on a large statue of the Virgin Mary and smashed it to smithereens.

My tooth was subsequently repaired by the dentist who fitted a crown, the statue was not so fortunate, completely beyond repair it was swept up and reverently disposed of while another was bought to replace it.

I must say generally I like statues and I was horrified by the accident, and definitely far more perturbed about the statue than I was about my tooth, but on reflection I think it's also a helpful image – the smashing of a plaster Saint, because it helps us to think beyond the stereotypical view of Saints, stuck in their stained glass windows – to something rather closer to home.

You see, we need to remember that the saints were real people – they may have done some amazing things, but they also got things wrong. There were times when they let people down, got the wrong end of the stick. But what they had in common was that God had worked in their lives, had set them apart for a special task in building the kingdom of God. In other words it wasn't about them, and they'd be the first to agree – it was about God and the work of transformation and redemption that he did.

And in that respect the figures in our stained glass windows and statues, those whose life stories are told in countless books are no different to each one of us, in fact St. Paul in his letters describes all of us as Saints. All of us whose trust is in Jesus Christ and who have been, are being, will be transformed and redeemed by him.

So here we are, in All Saints' Church, celebrating our Patronal Festival, celebrating the Saints – not just those of old whose names we know and cherish – the Church's past, but the Saints gathered here today, those who today put their trust in Jesus and seek to model their lives on him – we who are the Church's present and who are responsible for the Church's future.

The Saints of old faced many a challenge – many of them faced ordeals, a variety of different kinds of horrible deaths and at the very least they were persecuted, shunned and rejected, they found no willing audience for their message – they had to persevere, overcome the difficulties they faced and keep pressing on towards the goal of living the life that God had planned for them.

We on the other hand have our own set of difficulties. Thankfully none of us are likely to be boiled in oil, or nailed to anything but we do have our own challenges. We meet in a beautiful building, built to the glory of God and designed to seat and to serve the people of the village gathered in divine worship, but we meet in a third of it, while the other two thirds are redundant. We meet as a holy huddle while the rest of parish goes about their lives, unaware, unaffected, uninterested in what we're doing.

We meet troubled by our present and alarmed about our future. What does the future hold for our church? What witness to Jesus Christ will there be in this village in twenty, thirty, fifty years? We can say that it's in the hands of God and we'd be right, but God has placed the task in our hands. It's a daunting thought, a heavy responsibility which seems too hard to bear until we remember that the Church began with eleven frightened men huddling in an upper room. It was when, inspired by the Holy Spirit they stepped out boldly in faith that things began to happen. It was when they worked for the Gospel, risked everything for their Lord and Saviour that lives were transformed.

This year, perhaps for the first time in living memory we are celebrating All Saints without singing that great hymn by William Walsham-How, 'For all the Saints'.

"For all the Saints, who from their labours rest"

Well, it's time for the Saints of God to stop resting from their labours. It's time for us to take responsibility for the future of our Church. And by our Church I don't mean this building. This wonderful, beautiful building has stood as a witness to Christ for centuries and of course we want it to carry on doing so for many more. But if we want to just preserve historic buildings we can join the National Trust.

The faith that inspired people to build this building in the first place is Faith in a God who changes lives, who cleanses the stain of sin and eradicates the sting of death. It's Faith in a God who has a wonderful, awe-inspiring plan not just for each one of us but for each person out there going about their business.

And God will go on working here, reaching people, loving people, building his kingdom. But I so much want us and our Church to be a part of it. That is our calling, that is our purpose.

So what are we to do? Well, one thing is for sure – if we keep doing what we've always done, we'll get what we've always got. More decline until our Church is not just an irrelevance, but a part of history – a grand illustrious history but no future.

So we need to pray. We need to pray that God's Holy Spirit will transform us as he did those first disciples. That this upper room will be the start of a new phase in the life of God's Church. And then we need to place ourselves in his hands – our lives, our time, our talents, our money, to take risks, to be willing to make mistakes that we may build his kingdom.

At a time when we are discouraged perhaps we can gain some inspiration from Bishop Walsham-How and his wonderful hymn (I'm tempted to burst into song, but I'm not allowed to):

“And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long,

Steals on the ear, the distant triumph song,

And hearts are brave again and arms are strong,

Alleluia, Alleluia”

At this time perhaps more than ever, we as the Church need brave hearts, strong arms and above all a deep faith in God that whatever he calls us to and wherever he leads us we may follow to build his kingdom here.

Amen