

All Saints: Greatness in the Church

A sermon preached at Lindfield Uniting Church on Sunday 6 November 2022, by David Gill. Readings for the Sunday of All Saints were Revelation 21:1-6a, Ephesians 1:11-23 and St Matthew 5:13-16

We have just heard one of the most astounding claims made anywhere in the Bible.

Today's second reading came from a letter to Christians in the city of Ephesus. The author – St Paul, or someone using his name - seems to have been writing not only for the Ephesians but for wider circulation as well. He was trying to expand the horizons of those early believers, to help them glimpse the vastness of God's grace and the greatness of the authority invested in Christ Jesus.

Christ, he writes, has been raised from the dead and *seated at God's right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And [God] has put all things under his feet and has made him head over all things for the church.*

That's impressive enough! Even all these years later, it stops us in our tracks. But what follows is even more astounding.

Christ is *head over all things for the church* – wait for it - *which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*

Wow! What a claim! In Christ is the fullness of God, and in the church is the fullness of Christ. The Greek word translated "fullness" means completely filled up, absolutely packed, with no space remaining - like Sydney trains at 5.30 every evening! Jesus Christ is packed full of God, and the church is packed full of Christ!

Of course, we know what the writer means by "church". Not a building – they didn't have any buildings. Not an institution either – things hadn't developed that far. He's talking about people. People like ... us! Christ's body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Wow again! How great is us, as our former prime minister might have said. What a wonderful, awe-inspiring picture of the church.

But ...

There's just one small problem. When we look at the church today, that's not what we see – and I don't need to spell that out for you! St Paul of course had the same problem. When he looked at the church of his day, he didn't see it either.

St Paul, like us, indeed like Christians of every age, was stuck with the painful contrast between the church's high calling and the church as it actually is. How can we cope with that embarrassing – no, worse, that shocking – contrast?

The easy solution, of course, would be to opt out. We've all heard it. The church is not what it ought to be, Christians are a bunch of hypocrites, so I'm leaving.

Too easy. Because there's more to the church than its failures. Always has been. Always will be. Never forget it.

Some decades ago, I had to lead an ecumenical seminar on church renewal. There were 50 participants, from all over the world. For the first couple of sessions we tried to identify the things that were wrong with our churches. We filled several whiteboards with our list of what needed renewal. Then one of the participants, a Roman Catholic, interrupted.

“Yes, he said, “all these things need to be fixed. But I wonder in which of these congregations we have been describing - with their unexciting programs, their screeching choirs, and their boring preachers – the next generation of Mother Therasas, Pope John 23rds and Martin Luther Kings is even now being formed”.

He was absolutely right. When you talk about the church’s faults, you’re not talking about what matters most. Even with those faults, the church remains the God-given community of faith in which the word of life is heard, the sacraments of life are celebrated, and again and again the Lord of life is met. The extraordinary community in which the miracle of faith happens.

We all need that reminder. Repeatedly.

Jump with me back to the 1960s. Half a century ago the world was in turmoil. Students were storming through the streets of New York, Paris, Tokyo, Sydney. Young people everywhere were challenging the status quo, demanding change. Structures of all kinds – political, academic, family, the lot – were being attacked. And when the 4th Assembly of the World Council of Churches met in Sweden, in 1968, the churches too found themselves under fire.

At one point, young people in that Assembly shocked our elders by staging a demonstration against the churches. Speakers and flamboyant signs demanded that the religious establishment move beyond pious words and engage effectively in the struggle for justice and peace. We were angry, and it showed.

The World Council’s general secretary, an American named Eugene Carson Blake, had a chance to speak. And he saved the day. Gene Blake had credibility. He’d stood against the witch-hunts of McCarthyism. He’d done time in jail during the civil rights movement. He’d risked his job, as leader of his own church, because he’d had the guts to stand firm on contentious issues. Blake had street cred, and we knew it.

His words to the young protesters were spot on. “You are right,” he said, “to criticise the church. I know its weaknesses. But I have seen enough greatness in the church to make me want to stay with it. And I ask you to work with me, not against me, so that your challenges may be heard and acted upon.”

Blake won our confidence and carried the day. His words have helped sustain me, and I suspect many others, through the years that followed. “I have seen enough greatness in the church,” he said. Yes, I’ve seen some of it too. We all have.

There *is* greatness in the church. That’s why, long centuries ago, Christians started observing All Saints Day - November 1st each year, for the western churches. A day we remember the oft-forgotten greatness that’s hidden in the church.

But we must be careful how we remember. All Saints is not a time for patting ourselves on the back. It's a day for recalling greatness that's *in* the church, not a day for congratulating ourselves smugly on the greatness *of* the church.

People sometimes think saints are a Roman Catholic invention. Not true. Of course, the Vatican has its own elaborate way of recognising and venerating saints, but churches like ours also take care to commemorate particular people and particular events in Christian history.

Our worship book includes a list of outstanding names and dates. Not only the biblical greats – St Peter, St Mary, the rest of that gang. But others too. Reformers like Martin Luther, John Calvin, Pope John 23rd and Willem Visser 't Hooft, the first general secretary of the World Council of Churches. Renewers of society like William Wilberforce, Florence Nightingale, Mother Theresa. Theologians like Thomas Aquinas and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Musicians get a guernsey: Hildegard of Bingen, Bach, Handel. Australians like Alan Walker and Flynn of the Inland. And ex-Methodists will be pleased to know the Wesley boys scrape into the list too!

None of them perfect. All of them significant for the corporate memory of the church.

And what of us?

Maybe we should each take time to prepare a personal list of our own saints. People, past and present, who've had a special impact on our lives, helped make the love of God real for us. People who, however imperfectly, have shown us and those around us the meaning of the gospel.

Today, once again, we find ourselves celebrating the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ. And we're doing so in the very best of company. Not just the dozen or so people who happen to be in church this morning. The congregation, seen and unseen, is vast. Look! At this table we're accompanied by all the saints, known and unknown, of every place and race and time. It's a vast congregation!

Be thankful for all who celebrate with us.

For the greatness hidden within the church.

For so wonderful a heritage.

For all the saints!

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