



GRACE AND HOLINESS

A Pastoral Letter to the Teulu Asaph from the Bishop

18th November, 2021

We have recently been celebrating the season of the Saints. This begins on 1st November, when we celebrate All Saints' Day, and continues through to the celebration of All the Saints of Wales on 8th. It is a good reminder that we are all, every single follower of Jesus, called to be saints. The word "saint" comes from the Latin, "sanctus", meaning "holy", and there is a tendency for us to use the word to imply that a saint is someone extraordinary. "She's been a saint," we might say, "to have put up with him for all these years." There is both truth and falsehood in this. The truth is that most of the disciples of Jesus recognised in our Calendar as Saints are examples of lives of "heroic virtue" – that's how they get into our calendar. However, it overlooks a profound truth about the Christian faith: that to be a saint is a gift.

In the Book of Revelation, the saints are described as those who "have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (*Revelation 7.14*), while in Paul's letters, the saints are simply the Christians of any place. This is because those who receive Jesus Christ as Lord are already bought by his sacrifice on the Cross, and awarded the status of the righteousness of Christ. Holiness is a gift to be received, and not a prize to be striven for. It is given at our adoption as children of God in baptism, by which we are spiritually and symbolically buried and resurrected with Jesus. We don't deserve it, we don't earn it: Christ has won our sanctification. I sometimes think that we can take this too much for granted. "Herein is God's love," wrote John, "not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (*1 John 4.10*)

However, the fact that God's love for us is so profound, so embracing and so accepting, doesn't mean that it should be taken for granted. It is meant to change us forever. This is a question which Paul tackles in his Letter to the Romans, a masterclass on how God is at work in the world in Jesus. In the first five chapters of the letter, Paul argues as strongly as he can for God's free gift of salvation in Jesus – it is given, not earned. In Chapter 6, however, he has to address an obvious question: "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" Should we just accept God's love saves us, and not care how we respond and live? Not at all, says Paul. That's not how it is meant to work. God's love bought us in order to win us into a life of holiness, so now we must let the power of the Spirit govern our lives, and grow into wholeness and holiness and become like him.

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is the spiritual worship that you can offer. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so that you can test out what God's will for you is, good and acceptable and perfect." (*Romans 12.2*)

Christians therefore live in a "now and not yet" situation. God's love accepts us as we are, but God's love should also drive us to be transformed, to live into a fullness of life according to his will. Christianity isn't just about letting God plant his seeds of grace in us, but it is also about allowing the gardener to prune what is unholy from our lives, and to bring about the growth of what is holy instead. There is no laziness in Christianity: grace is gift, but also a summons; it is free, but it calls for commitment.

We're about to go into the season of Advent, and the whole thing is expressed in one of the central ideas of Advent. We ask God to stir us up, so that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armour of light – that we might be transformed by God's gift of love to become all that God wishes for us to become: saints in word and deed.

