What is a saint? **by Rev John Castle**

A sermon given on Sunday 1st November 2026
at St John the Baptist Church, Aldenham

Reading(s): Matthew 5:1-12

Introduction:

Today is an important day in the life of the Church, as we celebrate All Saints Day. You've probably seen messages wishing you a Happy Hallowe'en – although I can't see what could be happy about celebrating scary things. So let me wish you a happy All Hallows Day – another name for All Saints Day.

It's also an important day for little Arthur and his family, as we prepare to baptise him in this service. And as we do so, we are adding another saint to the family of the Church. So let me see if I can answer the question, "What is a saint?"

We usually use the word "saint" to refer to someone who is particularly kind or brave, a shining example and an inspiration. The word "saint" comes from the Latin "sanctus" meaning holy, and in the New Testament the word in Greek is "hagios" - someone who is set apart for God.

In some people, this holiness is more obvious to others, and over the history of the Church this has been recognised, usually after their death, and they have been an inspiration to others. Some of them get portrayed in stained glass windows. But God calls us all to be holy, to be saints. So when St Paul was writing a letter to a church, he would address it "to the

saints who are in Philippi", or Ephesus, or wherever they were.

The Beatitudes

Today's gospel reading is one of the best-known passages in the New Testament. It's known as The Beatitudes, because each line starts with the word "Blessed" (*beatus* in Latin). But as I read it, I had to ask myself why it had been chosen for All Saints Day. What do the Beatitudes teach us about what it means to be a saint?

In Matthew's gospel, these words are the first piece of teaching we come across. It's as if Matthew has chosen these sayings of Jesus as a way of introducing the radical message that Jesus wanted to bring - a sort of manifesto for the Kingdom of God – or as Matthew calls it, the Kingdom of Heaven.

These sentences describe the values of God's kingdom, which are so different from the worldly values of the secular world. They include promises or affirmations for those who in the world's eyes may seem to be losing out.

Instead of the worldly principle that to be successful you need to elbow your way to the front and be willing to step on others, Jesus quotes a phrase from the psalms that says it is the meek who God will cause to inherit the earth. Those who are "poor in spirit" will possess the Kingdom, not the self-important who think they are entitled to everything. Those who mourn will be comforted, the merciful will receive mercy, the peacemakers will be called children of God, as they reflect the character of their Father in heaven. The pure

in heart will be rewarded by seeing God – not only in heaven but by having a personal experience of him in this life – and those who hunger and thirst to see right prevail will be satisfied. Even those being persecuted for standing up for what is right or for acknowledging that they are Christians should count themselves blessed.

These are the values of God's Kingdom, says Jesus, and in the verses that follow he urges his listeners to see themselves as a light for the world, a city on a hill, modelling the values of the Kingdom of God in our lives.

Holiness

Holiness, then, is not some other-worldly ethereal quality that is of no earthly use. Holiness is about putting God's values into practice in our attitudes to things, and in the way we live and make a difference in the world.

In the years I have been working in the church, both as a volunteer and as an ordained person, I have seen so many Christians who sell themselves short, and make do with so much less than God wants for their lives. They see themselves as falling short of the high standards of the "real saints" and so settle for a mediocre level of achievement as Christians.

I've also seen people who put their faith into practice wholeheartedly, and are examples to others, but put themselves down because they think to be a real saint you have to know everything in the Bible, or be able to make up great prayers in public, or have amazing pastoral skills.

Of course, none of us are perfect, or excel in everything, but we all have something to contribute to the life of the Church, and we can all make a difference for God in the world. Being holy – or a saint –simply means that we have committed our lives to following Jesus Christ and putting the values of God's Kingdom into practice day by day. Today we have welcomed Arthur into God's family, setting him apart for God's service, and promising to support him in his journey of faith as he grows up. And we have prayed that God's Spirit would be present in his life, helping him to know God and follow Jesus.

Our calling to be saints is not about our worthiness for the job, but about offering ourselves to God and making room for him in our lives. That will certainly involve clearing out the rubbish of selfish attitudes and pride, and having a willingness to step outside our comfort zones in order to reach out to others. But God will always do far more in us than we can imagine, if we will just say "yes" to him. A real saint is a "work in progress", not the finished article.

Sparky

To finish, I'd like to tell you about someone who thought he was a loser. A boy nicknamed "Sparky" wasn't a success academically at school. In fact, he was the worst physics student in the school's history. He wasn't much good at sport either. Although he made the school's golf team, his poor play cost the team the championship. Socially, Sparky wasn't much of a success either. Although he wasn't actively disliked by other kids, nobody paid much attention to him. He never asked a girl out, for fear of being turned down. In adult life, the first woman he proposed to turned him down and

married someone else. During his time in the US Army in the Second World War, Sparky was part of a machine gun team, and recalled that the only time he got to use his machine gun he'd forgotten to load it!

Sparky had an ambition to be an artist for Walt Disney, and wrote to them. They replied, asking for a sample of his artwork, and requesting him to submit a cartoon on a specified subject. He drew the cartoon and sent it off with other work. Some time later he got a standard letter back regretting that they couldn't offer him a job. Sparky was disappointed but not surprised. He had always been a loser, and this was just one more loss. In a weird way, he thought, his life was kind of funny. He tried telling his own life story in cartoons through an imaginary little boy loser, a chronic underachiever named – Charlie Brown. Today, the Peanuts cartoon strip is known throughout the world.[1]

Charles M. Schulz was a man of Christian faith, and helped in his church Sunday School. As the Christian ethos behind his cartoons was recognised, he even created a book of cartoons called "The Gospel according to Peanuts". Perhaps the moral behind this story is, don't worry about what you're not good at. Do what you *are* good at, do it well, and do it for God.

We may not become famous like Charles M. Schulz. You may not end up with your picture being in a stained glass window. But if we're willing offer ourselves to God, and try to think,

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[1] Adapted from *Sparky, the Loser* p186 in *Hot Illustrations for youth talks* by Wayne Rice

say and do the right thing in our own sphere of influence, who knows what a difference we may make in this world?

At the end of this service we will give Arthur a candle lit from the Easter candle which is beside the font. As we do this we are symbolically saying to him that he has the light of Christ in his life, and we will challenge him to shine with this light in the world.

All of us, if we have opened our lives to God, can be torchbearers for the light of Christ in a dark world. Like the saints of old, we too can be an inspiration to others.