

## A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

### The Communion of Saints

All Saints' Sunday, November 4<sup>th</sup> 2018,

Rev. 21.1-6

John 11.34-44

WE keep today as All Saints' Sunday, but what has this to do with our Gospel story about Mary, Martha, and the raising of their brother Lazarus from the dead?

As many of you know, I've been spending the last two months looking through and sorting the papers of Stephen Sykes, who was Bishop of Ely in the 1990s, but who was also a major academic theologian, teacher of many - including me - and a good friend to me and Malcolm. He was also a very good preacher, and the best thing for me of the last two months has been reading through some of his sermons, which I hope to put on line for others to read, too.

One of them is entitled, 'The Communion of Saints', and I'm quite influenced in what I say now by what he said back then in 1994.

The belief in 'the communion of saints' is rooted deeply in everything we believe about Jesus Christ. The Son of God united all humanity to himself, and so to one another, when he took on our nature. So, there is a deep spiritual unity between all human beings. But, of course, sin disrupts it; but sin has been conquered through Jesus' life,

death and resurrection, and brings the healing of our relationship with God and each as we trust in him. So, the raising of Lazarus in the Fourth Gospel stands as a sign and profound symbol of that healing - a healing which transcends even death. Our renewed and healed brotherhood and sisterhood extends outwards, across race and culture, to everyone who participates in the death of Christ and lives in the light of the resurrection; and it extends across the boundary of time and eternity to those who are living in God's nearer presence now.

But, do we sense that fellowship? Particularly, do we sense that fellowship with those who have, as they say, 'gone before'? Sometimes, of course, we hear of deep experiences people have of closeness to those they have particularly loved in this life; but what about all those other saints, with whom we don't have such emotional bonds? How can we sense fellowship with them?

Stephen Sykes said that this takes two things: first, the work of *historical imagination* - and it *is* work. We have to set aside all the pressure of our culture to focus now on this, now on that, aspect of present experience. We may read or hear of someone from the past whose culture, background history and experience seems remoted from ours: this may include people from the Bible. How close can we feel to St Paul, for example? What would it have been like to celebrate the Eucharist with him in one of his churches? 1 Corinthians gives us a glimpse of the Church at Corinth in its worship - all the more authentic for showing us that everything was far from perfect! Are we prepared to enter into that, to do the work of imagination, to try to imagine what St Paul was really like, 'that

extraordinary man, capable both of violent outbursts and great tenderness'? This doesn't mean modernising someone from the past – re-making him or her in our own image, with all our modern attitudes, - but feeling our way behind the genuine differences to the underlying truth of the humanity which unites us. Sometimes good writers and scholars, films even, help us do this work – but we need to want to enter into it ourselves.

The saints of the past were, of course, real people. They weren't perfect; they weren't always likeable, in our terms. But that doesn't mean that we should demean them in the way we think of them. The Church is, and always was, a company of sinners, redeemed and used by God. Human 'feet of clay' are pretty much a pre-condition for the work of divine grace. Nor should we fall into that modern trap of assuming to know more about people from the past than they could know themselves. Sykes talked about the way 'our grossly sexualised culture enjoys sniffing around their repressions, oddities, weaknesses'; this can lead to an attitude which has been described as 'nothing but-ery'; '*his ascetical life was nothing but a matter of sexual repression*'; '*her overwhelming generosity was – we can see it now – nothing but a sign of her desire to be loved after having such a difficult childhood*'... You know the kind of thing. This kind of supposed analysis isn't the work of a Christian imagination trying to accompany them in what united them to God, rejoicing in his grace, and its fruits in their lives. What our faith commends us to seek and admire in the saints is the harvest of the Spirit:

*Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness and self-control.*' (Galatians 5.22-23).

Where we discern *this*, within the flesh and blood reality of saints, we discern what unites them with God, and what may unite them with us – even in a different landscape and culture. For even if the motives of saints are and were mixed, that is universally true of human beings – un included.

So when we see great virtue and grace in others – whether in famous saints, or in any fellow-Christian - can we nurture the second quality we need to sense our fellowship in the great communion; the quality of *generosity of spirit*? WE need not to envy other people's outstanding characteristics and gifts – and not to dismiss them.. Even in the matter of sanctity and effectiveness in the kingdom's work, it may be our capacity for envy which can lead us to downplay or explain away what we should rather admire and rejoice in. It's a kind of moral or even spiritual jealousy which could sometimes explain the satisfaction we get from 'nothing but-ery', that approach I've already mentioned, which seeks to cut people down to size. Perhaps this is particularly true when we think about people who might be said to bear marks of holiness or effectiveness for God in our own generation; our culture of competitiveness and envy may not encourage us to recognise them generously. Sometimes, even, it may be that saints far away in the past are the more admired, although, or even because, they're culturally different from us and seem remote

What Bishop Sykes said was that 'the challenge and indeed the comfort of the communion of saints is to belong with one another to a vast, international, ecumenical conspiracy of

*generous-mindedness*: I love that phrase! He went on to say that the Communion of Saints is no club of those who smugly cling on to their own good fortune in their relationship with Christ and one another. The saints have got work to do. Those who have gone before encourage and cheer us on, as a great cloud of witnesses. It's our task to do the same for each other as Christians over the widest possible canvas of the contemporary world, so that all may run with resolution the race which lies ahead of us, our eyes fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

*The full text of Bishop Stephen Sykes' sermon, 'The Communion of Saints', can be found at the site: [smykessermons.blog](http://smykessermons.blog)*