

A sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Upside down living and its risks

All Saints' Sunday November 3rd 2019

(Daniel 7.1-3, 15-18) Luke 6.20-31

Today's is an upside-down Gospel reading, and I'm going to treat it in an upside-down way, beginning towards the end of it and then moving back to the earlier part of it.

It's an upside-down Gospel because Jesus talks about living by values which turn the world's reasonable expectations upside-down. He teaches us positively to do good to our enemies— which is rather more than living by the dictum, 'I try not to do anyone any harm'. He enjoins *blessing* those who revile you – not just 'keeping your cool'. He tells us to offer our cheek *and* our shirt to the thief and assailant, and he teaches giving with reckless abandonment, without checking the credentials of the recipient – all of which seems pretty impossible, and certainly far from what's *reasonable*.

What kind of living is this? Many people might call it mad. It's certainly risky. Life turned upside-down. And so, if we move back now to nearer the beginning of the passage, we find Jesus describing people who live with the consequences of having lived a risky life – people who are poor, hungry, weeping and hated... and all these he calls 'blessed'.

Really? Blessed? You certainly have to put your trust in a divine future, where everything will be up ended, to believe that!

And then he goes further, he suggests that people who have lived within the bounds reasonableness – even reasonable virtue - have their reward *now* – they have nothing to look forward to in God's upside-down future.

Today we're celebrating 'All Saints' Sunday'. That's another way of saying we're celebrating the risky life of God's people, lived beyond reasonable expectations by countless individuals. Some are famous and are named in the calendar of the church and they have their own 'days' to commemorate them. Many others are virtually unknown, except among the circle of people whose lives they touch. In fact, All Saint' Day really exists as an

opportunity to celebrate all those more obscure ones – the ones who don't have their own festivals.

How did the custom of keeping special days for the 'saints' originate? Well, it originally started in the early days of the church, within the Roman Empire, when many Christians were giving up their lives for publicly professing their faith. When a Christian died as a martyr - say in the arena, torn to death by wild animals - some of their fellow-church members would come afterwards and collect their mangled body to give it a decent burial. (That must have been a risky thing in itself.) And then the church would remember the day on which they died, and believers would visit their graves on the anniversary of it to honour them, celebrating not just their courage in, but the fact that that day was their new 'birthday', into the heavenly kingdom. That's the origin of saints' days.

Later the term 'martyr', or 'witness', came to be applied not just to those who had died publicly for their faith, but to others who had taken significant risks, or shown heroic virtue, in being followers of Jesus Christ. Thus, a more general concept of sainthood came into being. The Celtic saints of these islands, for example, used to

say that 'white martyrdom' was seen in the lives of those who left their homes and that they all loved to venture into unknown lands and uncertain futures in response to God's call. Think of St Columba, for example, crossing the sea from Ireland to Scotland in the sixth century, perhaps in a coracle, to preach to the feared Pictish nations – venturing into a risky future for Jesus' sake.

We're all called to bear witness to our faith by our lives, and to enter the company of saints, and riskiness – upside-down living – is an important aspect of that.

If we just take some instances of famous, 'recognised' saints as points of illustrations, we see that they were people who took risks for the sake of love – love of God, and love of neighbour, going beyond what is reasonable, and very often paying a huge price either through their death, or within this life.

An early Christian saint and martyr was St Laurence, a deacon in the church at Rome in the third century. At a time of severe persecution, he was hauled before the authorities who demanded him to produce for them the church's presumed treasures (because persecutors very often like to get something out of it for

themselves). It was the deacon's task to look after the material possessions of the church, largely in order to care for the poor. What did Laurence do? He went and gathered the poor people whom he served and said to the magistrates, 'look, here are the church's treasures' – which I'm sure he truly believed. But he paid the price of what looked like a piece of insolence with his life.

Or take someone you may know more about – St Francis of Assisi in the 12th century; his first response to God's call came when he was moved to embrace a leper and then went to live among the lepers of the district to serve them – surely a risky thing to do. And then later, when he set out to preach the Gospel clad only in a ragged tunic and a rope, little boys threw stones at him in the street, but he carried on, singing.

In the twentieth century, Oscar Romero in El Salvador, could have followed his earlier path of being quite a conservative priest, not criticising the government – but when he became Archbishop of San Salvador, events propelled him in another direction, as a sharp critic of the military regime, its robbing of the poor, and its notorious death squads. In the end, one of those squads killed him.

Mother Teresa – we all know about her. She left her life of teaching in a Catholic school for well-off Indian girls – girls who might well have influenced the future of their country. She exchanged that path of reasonable Christian service for the risk of nursing the dying poor, of all creeds and none, in the precincts of a Hindu temple – we can discern quite a lot of risks there!

You can think of many more saints, famous and unknown to the wider world, I'm sure. But in all of them, holiness had something to do with risk-taking; the risk-taking of living by Jesus' upside-down values.

We're all called to live as saints; might there be some risk God asks *you* to take for him this week? A risk to your reputation, your purse; a risk to your time, a risk of being asked for more than you would really like to give, or even a risk to easy relationships with others. Saints are remembered as those who put their heads above the parapet for the sake of God's kingdom love and justice – will we recognise when the challenge comes, or will we just instinctively be too busy ducking?

Saints are risk-takers – and it is such that Jesus says are truly blessed. May we find it so.