

St Chad's, Ladybarn

Canon Albert Radcliffe

All Saints Day, 2016

October 30<sup>th</sup> 2016.

*The holy ones of the most high*

Daniel 7:18.

What is a Saint? Who is a Saint? This may surprise you, but you are.

When St Paul wrote a letter to one of his churches, say to the Romans, he usually began it like this, *To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints.* [1:7]

Had he been writing to St Chad's, he would have said, *to all God's beloved in Ladybarn, who are called to be saints.*

And what was a saint? The answer was given in our reading from the book of Daniel. *The holy ones of the most high*

A Saint is a holy one of the Most High and the Most High is God. So we, the ordinary members of St Chad's, are called to be saints, the holy ones of God.

I find that a frightening thought.

In my old age, I often pray a prayer of George Appleton, *Grant O Lord, that the years that are left may be the holiest, the most loving and the most mature.*

Loving and mature, I have no difficulty with, but that word *holiest*, sticks in my throat.

2.

It's the same with another prayer of George Appleton that I'm fond of, *Lord grant, that every frustration, every criticism, every tension, every failure, makes me more selfless, more holy and more loving.*

Frustration, criticism, tension and failure are things all of us understand, and we'd all like to be more selfless and more loving, but 'more holy!'

Can you pray that without the word *holy* making you feel awkward or embarrassed. I can't, though I do pray it.

Praying that we might be saints, seems a prayer too far, not only for us, certainly for me, but also for the scholars who have produced modern translations of the New Testament.

Here, for example, is my *Oxford Study Bible*, which uses the translation known as the REB, the Revised English Bible, and it annoys me!

Why does it annoy me? Well, here's how it translates that verse from Romans. *I send greetings to all of you in Rome, who are loved of God, and called to be his people. Called to be his people.* Whatever happened to that little word *saint* for one of God's *holy ones*?

It's not there. All Saints Day has disappeared! Saints and holy ones frightened them off. Does it frighten St Chad's off?

Now I knew George Appleton. He was my archbishop when I was British Chaplain in Haifa, and I can honestly say that he is the only person I have ever met for whom I could use the word *Holy*.

3.

And that was before I ever came across those prayers of his that cause me so much difficulty.

When I was little and grown ups asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I would disconcert them and say 'a hermit.'

And when I was at the cathedral there was chorister who when asked what he wanted to be said, an undertaker.'

The funny thing was that years later when I was taking a cremation the undertaker smiled at me and said, 'Do you remember me, Sir.'

What no one has ever said to me is, I'd like to be a saint, I'd like to be holy when I grow up.

At school I was always taught to read the difficult books and wrestle with the big questions because that way I might learn something. 'Stick to the easy stuff, Radcliffe, and you'll learn nothing.'

So on All Saints Day 2016 let's stick with those difficult, embarrassing, questions: What is a *saint* and what does it mean to be *holy*.

Most people will say, 'Oh! That's easy. A saint is just a very good person. A very, very, very good person. Someone who tried and succeeded more than the rest of us.

And that's OK until you meet someone who is so good at being good, that their goodness seems to be designed to put you in your place.

4.

**Their aggressive virtue and full-on law-abidingness is something we recognise in some of the self-righteous opponents of Jesus in the gospels.**

**Besides, as the French writer Jean Giraudoux said. 'Sincerity! When you can fake that you've got it made.'**

**Holiness, however, whatever it is, is one thing we can't fake. People can see through it.**

**So a saint, one of the holy one's of God, has to be someone who is more than just very, very, very good.**

**We need to do what our teachers always hoped we'd do and dig deeper.**

**It was then that, as someone with an ego problem myself, I cottoned on to the spiritual importance of the human ego and wondered what a real saint did to keep their ego from getting in the way of God.**

**Perhaps that was it! I felt I was on to something. I don't know about the ego getting in the way of God. But other people's egos could certainly get in the way of mine!**

**Egos as in someone who seemed to think that his ideas were always better than anyone else's. And the tender soul who couldn't believe that anyone could be as sensitive as she was,**

**Clearly our egos must be God's biggest problem with the human race; until that was, I had to work with someone who didn't seem to have an ego.**

## 5.

**He was a man entirely without opinions, always interested in what everyone else thought. Never made a decision if he could help it; and was so humble as almost not to be there.**

**There was a large hole where his ego should have been and I kept falling into it.**

**Our egos never seemed to be more in the way than when we tackle them head on! They always seem to find a way around our best intentions,**

**So what is a saint. How do they become holy, and anyway, what again is holiness?**

**The medieval answer to that question was, of course, for us to become monks and nuns: to live lives of poverty, chastity and obedience: to give up wealth and power, to be free of family ties and relationships and to hand our ego over to someone else.**

**But while that might work in a way for a few, if everyone became a monk or nun, pretty soon the world would grind to a halt and the human race die out.**

**Jesus solution to our problem was, as you might expect a very radical one,**

**In his day, devout Jews were those who struggled hardest to keep the Jewish law, the Torah and endlessly discussed how you could do this. But as Jesus saw it falling into the traps of self-righteousness in the attempt.**

**6.**

**So what did he do? He used his sense of humour to say that we could only be good enough for the Kingdom of God if we turned the legal calculations of the commandments into the non-calculating rule of love.**

**In short, into grace, because grace doesn't calculate advantage.**

**This is what the St Luke's Sermon on the Plain in today's gospel was about.**

**At Christmas 1956, as an ordinary RAF National Serviceman, I missed Christmas leave and was on Christmas Day Guard Duty instead.**

**However, at lunchtime I was treated to a most lavish and surprise Christmas dinner at which the officers took orders and waited on the men.**

**It was a survival of the Feast of Fools in the Roman Empire and an enactment of Jesus vision of the topsy turvey Kingdom of God.**

**In which the first are last and in which we don't calculate the moral worth of our actions like a lawyer. We just love our enemies and bless those who persecute us. We turn the other cheek, and if someone steals our coat, we let them have our shirt as well.**

**You know the rest. Saints live like that. As in the impossible, upside down, wrong way round, unreality of the Sermon on the Mount.**

7.

**The Kingdom of God was Jesus' joke too far. Imagine the *Prodigal Son!* Forgiven before you've apologised. It's all quite impossible. But this way, the non-calculating way of unlimited love, your ego is outflanked. It doesn't even get a look in.**

**It's all in my ebook: *The Bible as Comedy*. And there, you see, my ego has raised its head again.**

**For our last hymn we are going to sing St Patrick's Breastplate, one of my favourite hymns in which we bind ourselves to the Grace of Christ and, as his failed holy ones, try to follow him into his impossible Kingdom of non-calculating love.**

**No wonder modern translators have cut out any reference to us at St Chad's being called to be holy or to be saints.**