

A Great Cloud of Witnesses

"Seeing we are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily besets us."

Hebrew 12:1 (KJV)



From the Rector

The following sermon was preached by the Most Reverend Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury on All Saints Day in 2009. The Archbishop was speaking at a time of potential upheaval and disintegration of the Anglican Community. Even though the situations differ from our own time, the themes still resonate.

When Etty Hillesum the young Jewish writer who died in Auschwitz, was on her way via the transit camp in Westerbork to the train that would take her to the death camps, she scribbled a few last notes to friends. And in one of those notes she tried to explain what she believed was going on: "Someone [she said] has to take responsibility for God in this situation. That is, someone has to behave as if God were real. Someone has to make God credible by the way that they meet life and death."



And she -- at first sight a very unlikely candidate for this dignity -- attempted to do just that to make God believable by her life and her death.

Witnesses establish the truth by giving evidence. It really is as simple as that. When we celebrate the Saints, we celebrate those who have given evidence, who have made God believable by how they have lived and how they have died. The saints are the people who recognise that arguments will finally not win the day. God does not make himself credible by argument. God does not respond to our doubts, our intellectual querying, our uncertainty, by delivering from Heaven a neatly annotated list of logical propositions with which we cannot disagree. (I'm afraid that Professor Dawkins can bang on the doors of Heaven as long as he likes if *that* is

what he expects to happen.) God deals with us by our life and a death, by Jesus. And God continues to deal with us by lives and deaths that make him credible, that make Jesus tangible here and now. All those people who flocked into Westminster Cathedral a couple of weeks' ago to pay their respects to St Therese of Lisieux were recognizing that in her Christ became tangible for her generation and for ours and that is what the Saints *do*.



Do we think it is impossible to live a Christlike life in this or that setting, with these stresses or those, in the presence of dark evil and deep suffering? If we doubt it, it is not argument that will settle the matter: it is the bare reality of life lived in a Christlike way in such circumstances.

In the very early Church, local congregations would write eagerly to one another to describe the sufferings they'd been through and the martyrs who had glorified God in their midst. They were telling one another, 'It is believable. We have seen and touched with our hands, the word of life. We have seen

lives lived in desperate and reckless generosity to the point of death, and God has become credible afresh to us in those lives. That was the exchange, the common currency of the early Church and I suspect that the faith of the Church catholic – let alone the Anglican Communion – would be a bit different these days if our main currency of exchange was to let one another know how God had become credible to us.

But there's another dimension of this which comes out very clearly in that rich passage from *Hebrews*. These great figures that the writer to the Hebrews has listed, 'without us [says the writer] they will not be made perfect'. This is a truly extraordinary claim. We've heard about the heroes of the Old Testament, the Judges and the Prophets, those who have suffered atrociously for their faith, those who have performed stunning miracles, 'And yet [the writer to the Hebrews says baldly] without us they will not be made perfect'. Think of that in our own terms. Without us, Francis of Assisi will not be made perfect, without us St John of the Cross will not be made perfect, without us Mother Theresa will not be made perfect. *Surely some mistake?* As the editors say. But no, these great witnesses become perfect, they become fully into their life that God purposes for them when we respond, when we enter into a relationship with them. So that the way in which they have made God credible comes alive in us. They're not perfect as individuals who have scored exceptionally highly in the examination of Christian faith. They are parts of the body of Christ to which we too belong. Our life is bound up with theirs and amazingly and humbly, their life is bound up with ours, they enter into their glory when we come with them. It's that extraordinary realization of which we see a glimmer in the Buddhist doctrine: that the great *Bodhisattvas* do not enter into rest until they have

brought everyone they can with them. That's why they keep coming back, being reincarnated to speak to more and more people. This, I believe is a glimmer of the same insight that the holiest, the most *whole* of God's children, reach that wholeness only in communion with *us*. We might almost say, 'Heaven help the Saints if they depend on us to get them to their final wholeness'. And yet that is the bold and startling doctrine that the Bible puts before us as a reminder that no-one's holiness is their property and that the holiness of the Christian life is one given into the lives of others. That is where it becomes fully itself.

So at All Saints' tide we give thanks that God in Christ has made himself credible; credible in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus; credible in the lives of those in whom Jesus has come alive. And we thank God for that extraordinary promise: that the great Saints of the Communion of Christ's body depend on us as we depend on them in growing together. But two more thoughts may be in order very briefly here.



One is indeed something to do with our contemporary anxieties. We need to tell the stories of the Saints to remind ourselves what is possible and within any Christian family. We need to tell the stories of those who have made God credible to us. And within our Anglican family we need to go on telling a few stories about those who have shown us that it is possible to lead lives of Catholic holiness even in the Communion of the See of Canterbury! We need to be reminded of what we have to be grateful for in the lives of those who within our communion and fellowship have lived out God's presence and made him credible *here* in this fellowship with these people. God knows what the future holds for any of us for any of our ecclesiastical institutions, but we can at least begin with what we can be sure of; that God has graced us with the lives of Saints; that God has been

credible in this fellowship with these people. This church with its very particular place in the history of the Church of England is one small but significant facet of that great mystery and that great gift. And at times when the future seems more than usually chaotic and uncertain, it doesn't hurt simply to give thanks.

The second thing is of course that if the great saints of God are not made perfect without us, then in the future there are an awful lot of people on whose faith and holiness we are going to depend. One day we will be the golden age, or the great generation that has now passed: deeply unlikely as that may seem. One day people are going to look back on us and it would be nice to think that they would look back with gratitude and that they would feel that we in our generation had helped to make God credible and helped to show what was possible to them, so that they could gratefully and joyfully help us through the gate of glory by their response, their faith and their thanksgiving. So because time is not of great significance in the kingdom of Heaven, All Saints' day is, it seems a celebration of the future as well as the past. On All Saints' Day we may very properly look forward to the Saints we have not yet met and the Saints who have not yet been born, with whose holiness and salvation and welfare ours is bound up. We can ask what witness we want to leave to them and turn back again to ask ourselves what is possible for us if God in Christ is truly credible in the lives of his holy people.



A great cloud of witnesses; lives and deaths which like the life and death of ETTY HILLESUM take responsibility for making God credible; lives and deaths belonging in that great chain of causality started off not only by the Cross of Calvary but by the eternal self-giving of God on which the whole world rests; lives and deaths telling us the truth by providing evidence, for that living truth in the whole Church Catholic and in our own Anglican Family we give thanks. And that truth we resolve to pass on with joy and hope to those without whom we shall not be made perfect.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

+Rowan Williams 2009