

## All Saints' Evensong, 2006

Each of us has, I hope, events in his or her life that illuminate our understandings of who we are, and of our calling as Christian women and men. One of those vividly occurred for me about 15 years ago, when I was living in England.

One of my hobbies, then and now, has been collecting antique English Church silver (chalices, and patens, and alms basins and such), and a good friend of mine in the silver trade introduced me to a priest, Canon James Christie, who was the authority on the subject. Jim and I hit it off immediately, so much so that he and his wife invited me to travel up to Norwich Cathedral, and spend a long weekend with them in their house on the cathedral close.

The first evening I was there, after the cathedral had closed to visitors, Jim opened the steel door to the treasury, and we had a wonderful evening rummaging through all the goodies this medieval cathedral had collected over the centuries. However, my second evening, was even more special. Once again, we entered the cathedral after the tourists had exited for the day, but this time, we stayed in the nave and chancel. Jim turned on all the lights and then, he and I set about moving furniture. We pulled cupboards and wardrobes and all manner of things away from the walls. Lo and behold, there, behind all this furniture, were the remnants of splendid frescoes, their faded colors still vivid enough to get a sense of what they had looked like in their best days. And I realized, for the first time, that, in their prime, these English cathedrals had been anything but gray. Rather, they had been covered from floor to ceiling with wonderful images, setting out for the mostly illiterate worshipers the mysteries of the life of Jesus, and the stories of His saints. Right up until the Puritans blotted out the portraits and knocked the heads off the statues, these magnificent centers of prayer and liturgy enfolded those who worshiped there with the visual story of God's revelation, beginning with Adam and ending with much-loved local saints. Quite literally, those who prayed in this sacred space did so in the presence of Jesus, the Lord of all history, surrounded by the saints on every side.

Isn't that exactly what you and I are doing, in the twilight of this November afternoon, here in this cathedral church? Look around, and you can see the saints on every side. I glance up to the clerestory windows here in the chancel to find myself enfolded by the apostles. Look around, right

now, just look around you, and you will see the saints and Jesus embracing you, in images wonderful and mysterious, images that Em Rowe can open to you in great detail, if only you ask.

And that, my dear sisters and brothers of this cathedral community, that is exactly what this feast of All Saints is really all about. Listen to the beginning of the Collect for today: “O Almighty God, who has knit together thine elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of thy Son Christ our Lord. . .” As Anglican Catholics, we believe not only that we are joined to each other here, but also that, in some mystical fashion, we are also joined to all of those holy souls, men and women of all walks and stations, who have trod the paths of faith before us, and are still with us, even as we pray this autumn eventide.

These women and men of faith are here with us right now, in at least two ways. The story is told of the little girl whose fairly agnostic parents found it convenient to park her in one of Manhattan’s glorious churches while they went off and did their shopping. Somewhat to their amazement, they found that she not only tolerated these times alone in such great Gothic spaces, but, in fact, relished them. Finally, her father, whose religious indifference was overcome by his curiosity, asked her, “What in the world do you do to occupy yourself in church, honey?” The little girl smiled and replied, “Papa, I watch the saints, with the light shining through.” That child had grasped the cosmic reality that eludes so many Christians of more advanced years: that what makes a saint a saint, is precisely the living out of a life of such transparency that the light of Jesus does indeed shine through. Enveloped as we are by these saints, women and men like us, we are constantly reminded that holiness is not only a possibility, but a virtual necessity. As Eastern Christian theologians remind us over and over again, the normal state of humankind is complete union with God: anything less than that is abnormal, not the way things are meant to be. The example of the saints provides absolute assurance for us that this is indeed the case.

But along with their example comes a challenge. Listen to the second half of today’s Collect: “Grant us grace so to follow thy blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those ineffable joys which thou has prepared for those who unfeignedly love thee.”

The call to us, you and I, is to do exactly what these men and women who have gone before us have done, to live our lives so deeply rooted in Jesus and His love that we, too, when our days are over, may effortlessly be changed “from one degree of glory to another,” (2 Cor. 3.18), no longer needing light, as the reading from Rev. reminded us, because “the Lord God will be [our] light and [we] will reign forever and ever” (Rev. 22.5). It is to become, in the words of the great Puritan theologian Cotton Mather, “visible saints” in our own time.

And in rising to this challenge, you and I need to be aware of another all-present reality in this communion of saints whose company we enjoy, the reality that only a very small fraction of God’s enfolding saints are pictured in the images surrounding us. I think of my friend Walter Ciszek, “Uncle Wally,” a priest who spent some 30 years in Lubianka, and the Soviet *gulag*. Anyone privileged to spend time in his company knew long before the Church began the formal process of declaring him a saint that he was indeed one of God’s “special friends.” I think of my grandmother, saying her rosary in rapt contemplation of things far beyond my ken, and I know well the holiness there. And I think of other people I know, part of this family of faith that gathers here on Silver Ave., and I sense a presence of the living God as real as the air I breathe.

For the mysterious reality, the communion of saints, into which the Lord Jesus has called us, and continues to beckon us, over and over again, draws us not only back into our hallowed traditions, but grounds us in this present moment, a living moment of God’s terrible transforming grace. It sets before us the rich images that enfold us, to draw us ever more deeply into the mystery of God himself. It sets before us our relatives and friends, our loved ones, who have walked the paths of faith, as examples. And, most of all, it challenges us, gathered in this great communion with Peter and Paul, Basil and Chrysostom, Cranmer and Andrewes, and with the woman or man sitting next to me right now. It challenges us to give our lives over completely to God, that we, too, in the words of our lesson from the book of wisdom, “might receive a glorious crown, and a beautiful diadem from the hand of the Lord.” It beckons us to be, with those who have gone before, saints of God, “with the light shining through.” May it ever be so in our temple, who is indeed “the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (Rev. 21.22). Amen.