

Trinity College Cambridge
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SOME MODERN SAINTS?

The Unknown Saints

Acts 17: 22–31 Luke 13: 20–30

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Good evening. As I was preparing what I was to say this evening in this venerable chapel, I was reminded of what is alleged to have been said on his death bed by Voltaire. As he lay dying, he was offered extreme unction, necessarily including the question as to whether he *'renounced the devil and all his works?'* He is reported to have replied, probably apocryphally of course, that *'this did not seem the best time to be making new enemies'*.

Previous speakers in this series of addresses on modern saints have suggested such eminent and marvellous people as Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It is therefore with some diffidence that I put forward my thesis tonight that the concept of named saints is medieval in conception and, modern or not, in the 21st century, is extremely difficult both intellectually and theologically.

I did explain that to Michael Banner and despite the fact that this was the act of a typical Oxford man, deconstructing the first thesis he comes to, Michael graciously still invited me to speak on the subject of unknown saints. So here goes.

I do believe in saintliness but I do not really believe in saints at all, as the veneration of men and women of heroic virtue. I certainly don't believe we should elevate contemporaries or even the recent dead publicly to such status. If that ever worked, then it is not appropriate now.

It does not match either our current predicament or our way of appraising people. For the first, as an example, life expectancy is increasing without a necessarily matched quality of life. The consequence of this is that the 21st century will demand not the heroics of great public deeds but quite another sort of heroic private behaviour, a quiet, stubborn, sacrificial decency in the face of prolonged suffering of ourselves and those whom we love. We have not seen this since the aftermath of the First World War but such granularity of compassion will now be the leitmotif of modern and unknown saints.

As for the second, how we see other people, I would suggest that the cult of celebrity has devoured itself. We now know that human beings cannot be placed upon a pedestal. Relentless exposure has revealed the fallibility of the greatest, from the drinking of Churchill to the womanising of John F. Kennedy, alongside the failures of politicians, media moguls, footballers, bankers, heart surgeons, priests and, without doubt, police officers. It will do the same for saints and we should not put saintliness as opposed to sainthood at such risk.

If I am wrong and am confronted in not too many years' time by St Peter, I shall probably spend a lot of eternity reflecting that Trinity College Chapel was not the best place to have made new enemies. If therefore I risk damnation, I need to be pretty clear now. I need a get out clause. I believe in holiness and have occasionally met it. I believe in evil and have certainly met that. I believe in saints with a small 's' but not necessarily with a big one.

In this position, I should note, I do not stand alone. Article XX of the 39 Articles of the Church of England states that *'the Romish Doctrine concerning... (the) Invocation of Saints' is 'a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God'*. Interesting as that may be, my main argument can be expressed in a more modern manner in the wonderful phrase used by Diarmaid MacCulloch, Professor of the History of the Church at, may I mention, Oxford University – once neatly described as the Latin Quarter of Cowley – that *'one definition of a saint is someone who has not been researched well enough'*. Or, to use a 19th century comment, *'no man is a hero to his valet'*.

Let's go back to the beginning. The English word *'saint'* is a translation of the Greek ἅγιος (hagios), which means *'to set apart', 'to sanctify' or 'to make holy'*. The word *'saint'* is frequently used in the New Testament: 229 times in the original Greek manuscripts and 60 times in the King James version. However, the apostolic authors of scripture did not use the term to refer to deceased persons who have been granted sainthood but rather to living persons who had dedicated themselves to God and in particular to Christ. Throughout his Epistles, Paul uses the term frequently as a short hand for the followers of Christ. This use can still be found as late as the 17th century in Puritan writings, including much of the pamphleteering during the Civil War period. Most specifically, no one is called St anything in the Gospels. So named sainthood is a post Gospel creation.

It appears that the central significance of martyrdom in the early church produced a need for a nomenclature of the honoured dead. Local traditions began to emerge of names accorded special veneration. From the first, there was concern among church fathers that such names should be of individuals of the uttermost good character. To set against that, of course, there is also evidence of the significant financial and reputational advantage accruing to the sites of such veneration. And not just of names. I was a pupil at Chester Cathedral Choir School, the forerunning Abbey of which had built its wealth on the fortuitous discovery of a fragment of the True Cross, which had happened to wash up nearby. (Parenthetically, I should add just near the finishing line of the current day racecourse: nothing like luck.) Nonetheless, in the first millennium AD, the overall process by which someone became a recognised saint was a bottom-up one, by acclamation over decades and centuries by communities of faith.

In the 10th century, this began to change, as the Papacy took unto itself the decision making process for canonisation ending with an encyclical to that end in 1170. There are currently over 10000 saints recognised by the Catholic Church, which has its own bureaucracy for so doing. The idea is that a person should be someone of heroic virtue, with proven miracles to their name. The concept of the Devil's Advocate is part of the operation. The Church of England does indeed still have a canonisation process of its own, via the General Synod, which does not fill me with confidence either.

Over the years, saints have followed patterns: heroic like St George and St Catherine, mystic like St Julian of Norwich, the saints in Foxe's Book of Martyrs facing flame and horror, the intelligent bravery of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the compassion of Mother Theresa. Their elevation and veneration follow fashions as the centuries wheel. There is something analogous here to fashions in the concept of leadership. In the ancient world, leaders were genuinely physically and personally heroic, like Alexander. By the 19th century, leadership was a consequence of birth, determined on the playing fields of Eton, as Wellington put it. The wars of the twentieth century and the growth of capitalism produced a culture, irrespective of breeding, of charismatic military and industrial heroes from Patton and Churchill to Henry Ford and Steve Jobs. The latest ideal is the value-driven leadership of Nelson Mandela. In the same way, a new fashion in sainthood seems to be its innate politicisation, which can perhaps be discerned in the decisions, first by Pope Benedict to put forward John Paul II for fast track canonisation, seemingly to consolidate the conservative legacy which Benedict and John Paul have represented and then, as a counter-weight, Pope Francis doing the same for Pope John XXIII, author of the liberalising Second Vatican Council, the results of which both Benedict and John Paul II so disliked.

I asked for the passage from Acts of the Apostles to be read tonight about Paul confronting the altar of the unknown God because I wanted to distinguish between God and saints. If our faith is true, then there cannot be an unknown God but only the Godhead revealed to us in Christ Jesus. But there can be and are unknown saints. What the contemporary world most needs is an acceptance and a celebration of saintly behaviour in some part of many, many peoples' lives: so many people that they are and must be unknown.

When I was young, I remember reading Vera Brittain's 'Testament of Youth' with horrified attention and then running out of patience with her 'Testament of Experience', relating a period of mind-blowingly boring, quiet acceptance of ruined lives, particularly of the women left to nurse the memories of or the shattered remnants of their men. As Wilfred Owen described in the last two lines of 'Anthem for Doomed Youth',

*'Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.'*

We are not the generation wrecked in the First World War but we are a generation where heroism is going to be needed in the same way, quiet, thankless, unobserved. I shall now tell you about a modern saint. I know her but you do not and you never will.

She is called Gill. That is her real name and she is one of our neighbours. She does not know I am saying this about her. She is the wife of an engineer, who spent his life building decent things in poor African countries. He is called Terry. She still is the wife of Terry but he is not there anymore. He left a while ago, just leaving his body to be looked after, dressed, washed, fed, showered and helped to the lavatory. Not often a word used in Trinity College Chapel but a place of heroism nonetheless. She cares for him 24 hours a day, with very little complaint, with a smile, with endless patience and with a heart that must be breaking every dawn. She will not put him in a home. There are thousands like her, tens of thousands, millions across the world and their numbers grow every day. They are displaying saintly behaviour. And even when great universities like this break the secrets of genetics to stop this particular curse, the curse of Alzheimer's, then the next generation will face its own dilemmas. And they will need unknown saints to help them then too.

As a generation, we need to move away from a medieval concentration on saints as celebrities and instead to celebrate and help where we can the unknown saints who live among us. The quiet granularity of small, repeated deeds is a true Christian virtue: they also serve who stand and wipe. Because, if we do not recognise and support these saints, we are unlikely to join them 'marching in'. But Gill will be there, 'in that number'.