



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for All Saints (1st November) 2025

During the Middle Ages, the Bishops of Rome slowly took from local churches to themselves the role of deciding who could be venerated as a saint in the Roman Catholic world. From this development, there emerged a lengthy and expensive process by which such questions were determined: one of the less fortunate consequences of this was that amongst the factors requisite for someone to be declared a saint was that he or she had rich friends or supporters. To his credit, the late Pope Francis trimmed the procedure considerably.

Initially, of course, the churches of the Reformation were not much interested in saints. However, it was not long before heroes of the struggle began to embed themselves in reformed consciousness. The nineteenth century *Martyrs' Memorial* in Oxford, commemorating the lives and brutal deaths of Cranmer, Latimer and Ridley three hundred years previously is an instance of this. Whilst there is no formal suggestion that these individuals through the quality of their lives achieved a place in Heaven, I suspect that those who raised the monument would not be overly exercised if people inferred from it that they had.

In recent revisions of the Church of England Liturgy, the calendar of saints' days has included quite a number of post-Reformation folks. The process by which they attained a place was quite simple: proposal by the Liturgical Commission and a vote in General Synod.

As I have observed previously, for all the apparent objectivity of the undertaking, the making of saints or their equivalents in other traditions is subject to fashion. We see this in the contemporary secular realm with its appetite for pulling down the statues of those formerly considered great and good. However, there is a similar dynamic in ecclesiastical circles: there are many saints, whose veneration has fallen out of vogue and is neglected; whilst new saints reflect the favoured attitudes of the day. There is a conscious effort to hunt around for representatives of humanity considered neglected by past generations.

In all of this, whichever procedure is followed, we doubtless overlook individuals whose sanctity is obscured by prevailing attitudes: people who have tried in their own way to be faithful to the Gospel, but who have either failed to capture the attention of the types of others, who energetically seek to pursue a cause or whose virtue was not of a sort interesting to the people around them.

All Saints' Day stands as a testament to the fact that we do not know it all: we cannot see the world and the people in it as God sees us. There are, surely, many millions of people, whose lives were of such a character as to further the divine Purpose in the world: not least in the quiet but consistent quality of their discipleship. Maybe, even, God sees sanctity in some, who, like John the Baptist, never committed themselves to Christ and His Church in this life.

Today's festival, therefore, is in part an exercise in humility: acknowledging that there are more things in Heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophies and theologies. We honour in principle, if not in detail, all those whom God sees as saints in their time.

It might also encourage us to scrutinise a little the reasons why we hold up as saints the people that we do: what such veneration says about the things we consider important and whether we might need to broaden or amend our notion of what constitutes holiness or virtue if it becomes apparent that our admiration is rather too beholden to our own characters and perspectives. I suspect that we would all be surprised to see who features in the celestial calendar of saints.