

All Saints Day

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Revelation 7:9-17

1 John 3:1-3

Matthew 5:1-12

Saints, heroes, and people like us

"I think I am my own hero today as I work at getting well again from mental illness". Last Monday, Labour Day, National Radio had a whole morning of discussion about heroes led by Maggie Barry. Between the interviews she read emails from listeners and this was one of them. I don't think Maggie Barry was making any connection between heroes and All Saints Day but it got me thinking.

I had also read a press release about a campaign being run in England, called "Halloween Choice". The headline in the press release was: "Church launches children's national hero hunt".

It read, "The Bishop of Middleton, the Rt Revd Mark Davies, is launching the first ever poll to find the UK's 'most heroic job' according to the nation's children. The online survey, at www.HeroVote.org, was launched at a school in Manchester. The poll is part of the Halloween Choice campaign, led by the Church of England's Diocese of Manchester, marking its third anniversary of exploring how to support and resource those parents and children who wish to mark Halloween in a positive, less "gruesome", way. Today's launch of the search for the UK's most heroic role - run in conjunction with The Children's Society - is part of encouraging a shift towards marking 'All Saints' Day' (1st November) as a celebration of heroes and saints, and the ultimate triumph of good over evil. It marks the next step in the Church's moves to encourage children to enjoy a great Halloween and to spark a wider public debate about the nature of our way of celebrating the date.

A list of 25 roles has been drawn up, based on the nominations of 100 children from a range of schools. It includes taxi drivers, supermarket workers, journalists, doctors, footballers and parents. The Bishop of Middleton commented: "It is fascinating to see the range of jobs in the list and I will be watching the polling with interest. The Church has celebrated the lives of the saints for many years and the example that they set for Christians today. In a small way, this poll will hopefully encourage young people to look to the more everyday heroes around them as a stepping stone to exploring the lives and deaths of the saints that we mark on All Saints' Day."

This article, and then the radio programme, pushed me to ask myself: "So what's the difference between heroes and saints?"

Perhaps saints are not necessarily well known until after their deaths. Despite Ed Hillary being very humble and so ordinary that many people felt he was "just one of us", in fact he was very well-known – and used his position, of course for others as he raised money to build schools and bridges in Nepal. He was an example of commitment and commonsense. Many of us would like to be more like him – but perhaps that's one of the differences between saints and heroes: in their own time many saints were not popular or appealing figures. Is the difference something about saints having a very deep sense of vocation, either in the person themselves or perceived by the community later as they examined the life and work of the person?

Vocation has been defined by story-teller Frederick Buechner as 'the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet'. Yet vocation is not restricted to saints. Many of us have a sense of it, although understanding the idea of 'vocation' may provide the link between the visionary role of activists for social change, who want above all to make a difference, and the more prosaic pursuit of economic security as the number one goal in life.

So vocation may not be the distinctive factor about sainthood. Let's look at the mechanics of it. For Anglicans, saints are regarded as those who are named in our New Zealand Prayer Book. Getting in there is a much easier process than all the complex steps of proof and approval that are needed for becoming a saint in the Roman Catholic Church! When the New Zealand Prayer Book was being prepared there was a commitment to including in the calendar more recent people, more from the southern hemisphere, and more women. You can see from page 22 of the Prayer Book that during this month we will be remembering Martin of Porres a seventeenth century monk from Peru (his day is tomorrow), Te Whiti o Rongomau from Parihaka here in NZ, Leo the Great fifth century Bishop of Rome, and Mechtild of Magdeburg a mystic and prophet in thirteenth century Germany.

This year General Synod named some new saints and their feast days for our Church Calendar:

8 August Mary MacKillop, Australian founder of the Sisters of St Joseph, died 1909;
18 August Brother Roger of Taizé: Encourager of Youth, murdered in 2005;
5 September Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Missionary of Charity, died 1997;
22 November CS Lewis, Apologist, died 1963;
10 December Thomas Merton, Spiritual Writer, died 1968.

You may know of most of them, except perhaps Blessed Mary McKillop. She is so far the only Australian to be beatified, although many Australians are awaiting her canonisation as a saint. On July 17, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI prayed at her tomb during his visit to Sydney, Australia for World Youth Day 2008 – a good sign! Also to be named as "Blessed" is definitely a step on the journey to sainthood in the Roman Catholic church! Her name reminds us of the Gospel reading for today: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake". It was carefully chosen for All Saints Day, so maybe that tells us something about saints. These are not popular or praised qualities, and they show people whose lives stand for something outside the mainstream. They also indicate something about struggle for integrity.

The result of the "most heroic job" poll: First: Parents with 25% of the vote, Second: Fire-fighters with 13% of the vote, Third: Soldiers with 12% of the vote. The Bishop said: "Parents are rightly recognized for the sacrifices they make in the dedicated service of their children. Parents give lots of love and care, and will often go without so their children can have opportunities."

And what of the Radio NZ Listener who inspired me? "I think I am my own hero today as I work at getting well again from mental illness". Others who struggle with various kinds of dragons do inspire us. We can also be encouraged to value appropriately

our own journey and heroism. What would happen if we each were able to say of ourselves: today I am my own hero following the path of the saints? Maybe the key difference between saints and heroes is in our sentence for today: "Happy are those who find refuge in the Most High".

May your safe place, your turangawaewae, always be in our God as you journey on, heroically. Taste and see how gracious the Lord is!

233 I will sing the wondrous story;
448 Blest are the pure in heart;
470 Rejoice in God's saints;
455 For all the saints