

Traditionally All Saints' Day is officially celebrated on 1st November, which was last Wednesday. However, in the church calendar All Saints' Day is a principal feast therefore it is commemorated not only on the day itself but for seven days after, for a total of eight days, so we are officially still in the All Saints' octave today. This extension of All Saints' Day to an octave has its origins in the catholic roots of our Anglican practice, and is specifically directed by a rubric in the *Book of Common Prayer*.

Celebrating the feast of All Saints' on 1 November dates from the ninth century, although the saints have been commemorated at other times of the year for much longer. The most ancient celebrations in the third century were in remembrance of martyrs, those who had given their lives because of their faith, but because so many godly women and men provided an example of faith and inspiration to the Church, a specific day was set aside. The day provides an opportunity to look at the witness of both a few extraordinary Christians, and also a lot of very ordinary ones who have followed Jesus in extraordinary ways.

All Saints' Day' was often known as All Hallows' Day, and so the day before came to be known as Hallows' Eve, or Hallow E'en. The triumph of the saints was recognised as the consequence of overcoming the forces both of paganism and of evil. Hallow means to make holy, consecrate and honour.

During the All Saints' octave we are given the opportunity to reflect on the lives of many saints, known and unknown, and to ponder on what saintly living might look like for us.

Of course, the word "saint" simply means "holy one." Someone who has responded to God's call on their lives and has been a faithful follower. Each saint responding to God's call in a different way. Some dedicated their life to prayer, caring for the poor, the dying, others gave up their worldly goods and lived in poverty. Many were persecuted and died because of their beliefs. Saints were those who were able to look at the worst in this world, very often be subject to it, but then look to life beyond it.

Most people visualise saints as serene people, detached from life. But, in fact, many were people faithful to Christ's call in the midst of the everyday, in times of trouble, in times of pain and illness, in times of sorrow and hardship. Through God's grace and help and their determination they have sought to faithfully follow God. It wasn't so much what they did but what God did through them. Some saints had their most profound spiritual experiences in times of illness, the medieval English mystic, Mother Julian of Norwich, had her visions at a time when she was so ill she wasn't expected to live. Mother Teresa wrestled with doubt for nearly all her life. Hundreds of years before her, St John of the Cross wrote of the 'dark night of the soul'.

The stories of the saints encourage and inspire us in **our** service to God. Their lives and testimonies point us to God's kingdom values and reveal what kingdom life is like. The way in which they lived out their lives, models for us examples of faith, perseverance and service which can help us on our own faith journeys. Many people are regarded as 'saintly' though they may not be Christians, such as Mahatma Gandhi or Princess Diana, winners of the Nobel Peace Prize, and great politicians like Nelson Mandela. We can admire their humanity, compassion and sacrifice for love, truth, peace and justice and be inspired by them too.

We imagine that we can't be holy or saintly people because we're too busy, not well enough, too old, not old enough, we can all think of excuses. However, we are not asked to be heroic, or live in poverty, or be persecuted for our beliefs. We are asked to let God's light and love shine through us in our daily interaction with others. Our own holiness starts then with a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, the mediator of all holiness. And just as we are called into a relationship with God, we are called into a relationship with each other, the Communion of Saints, the Priesthood of all believers. Saintly living is living out our calling through the relationships we have with others, living a life of generous compassion and radical love for God and our neighbour

As we cast our eyes backwards through history, we rejoice in that great multitude of saints named and unnamed, now living in eternal life. This All Saints' tide we remember that the saints of the past keep company with us. Those who have made an impression on us, those who we have had a particular connection with. Remembering, as the All Saints' collect tells us, that all the saints are 'knit 'together in one communion and fellowship. They are our examples, here with us as we gather for worship, they join with us as we celebrate Holy Communion. They are too, our companions and our encouragers, as, we seek to answer Christ's call to follow him.