

SERMON DELIVERED AT HOLY GHOST ANGLICAN CHURCH ON 2 NOVEMBER 2014 BY REV. J.O. "PETE" WRIGHT

Today I want to speak about All Saints Day. Along with the other liturgical churches around the world, we celebrated it on November 1.

In order to slide gently into that topic, I ask you to consider something from your own life. Your heroes. When I was a kid, mine were Superman, and an American movie star named Roy Rogers (dubbed as the "King of the Cowboys"). And when my friends and I played outdoors, we would strap on a red towel for a cape...and some fake "six shooters" on our hips. That's what cowboy pistols were called. As I slid into my teenage years, various musicians were my passion. Then, when I entered the Franciscan Order at the age of 18, St. Francis became my hero. And other saints too. In the Catholic Church, praying to saints is something they do with great fervor.

After I became an Anglican, not so much.

Earlier this year I read an article by a theology professor in the diocese in the U.S. where I have assisted in the past, Albany, NY. His name is Chris Brown. He said that before he became a priest, in his General Ordination Exam the question was "what role do saints play in the lives of Anglicans?" Chris wrote that they are an example and encouragement for us and that we can seek their prayers. When he got back the results of the exam, the professor had written in red ink, "Anglicans do not pray to the saints."

But, as Chris says, there are different opinions about that subject depending upon with whom you are speaking. In our 80 million strong Anglican Church, we have very "high church" priests and congregations...and we have the other end of the spectrum, popularly known as the "low church."

In defense of those Anglicans who like to ask saints to ask God for a little extra help, a little background is in order. You know, there is merit to understanding that salvation is not just an individual matter, but it occurs in, with and through the fellowship of believers because we are all incorporated into the Body of Christ. Because of that, our faith is personal...but it is also built on community.

And don't we need to recognize that praying to the saints is not the same thing as prayer addressed to God. It is not about saying the saint is divine. It is simply a matter of requesting their prayers of intercession. Not much different than when I ask a friend to pray for ME.

How do the saints know to pray for us? Well, it is not due to any capacity or omniscience of their own. That would make them God. If things really work that way, and praying to the saints has value, then we have to say that it is God who enables it to happen. You might say he supplies the fiber optic network.

Is it Biblical to pray to saints. Professor Brown says it may very well be at least implied in Scripture. In the Book of Revelation, John's vision of heaven is that it is inhabited by "One seated on a throne, and by the Lamb that was slain (Jesus), and four living creatures, and innumerable angels, and a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages. These are the redeemed of earth who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb."

That "great multitude" with God in heaven is what we call the Church Triumphant. And we call ourselves here on earth the "Church Militant." Why? Because we are still struggling, still on the journey. And this Church Triumphant and the Church Militant make up the Communion of Saints.

Listen to Revelation 8:3 and 4. "Another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a golden censer; and much incense was given to him, so that he might add it to the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, went up before God out of the angel's hand."

Back to heroes. I think it is safe to say that we have way too many of them that really don't do our spiritual lives much good. Singers, actors, sports figures. Many of them lead lives that are ungodly at best.

And our spiritual life is what prepares us to live with God for all eternity. So that's the one we really need to spend a lot of time on. And to teach our children to do the same thing.

What is a saint? Simple. Someone who made it to heaven. And why not saints as heroes? Do you have to be a Mother Theresa of Calcutta to qualify? Or a St. Catherine of Genoa? Can you be rich and married, or do you have to be a monk or a nun with a vow of poverty and chastity? No. To be a saint, here is what you need to do:

Understand that God made you and he loves you like no one else can.

Learn about Jesus from the Bible and figure out how he wants you to live.

Be seriously involved in a Christian community. Go to church and Sunday school and receive Jesus in Holy Communion. That's a good way to "keep holy the Lord's day." Keeping holy the Lord's day is one of the Ten Commandments.

Be very serious about forgiving people when they have hurt you. No reservations. Every person who hurts you must be forgiven. That's tough, but it can be done.

Go out of your way to help others.

Pray every day. In the morning, ask God to help you to live like a Christian during the day, at home and at school, at work and with your family and your friends. Before you eat, thank God for the food you have. At night when you are in bed, thank God for the day and ask Him to bless your family, your friends and all the people in our whole world. Do you think God listens to you? Our Bible, which is the Word of God, tells us he does.

And sometimes saints come in small packages. Here is a true story about someone very young that we might call a saint. A hero.

It was the year 1880. Hattie May Wiatt was a very poor little 8 year old girl from a ghetto in the U.S., from Philadelphia, Pa. She was crying one morning, sitting on a bench outside Temple Baptist Church. She had been turned away from attending the Sunday school class. The pastor, Dr. Conwell, stopped to console her. She told him the teacher said the class was too full. Dr. Conwell thought the real reason was that because of her shabby clothes, she didn't fit in their circle. So the PASTOR got her into class.

Two years later, Hattie May lay dead in the poor tenement building, the slum, in which she lived. She died from a disease called Diptheria. Her parents called Reverend Conwell. He came to their house right away and he agreed to bury their daughter.

As Hattie's body was being taken away by the funeral people, a worn and crumpled red purse fell on the floor. It looked as if she got it by rummaging for it in a trash dump.

The pastor picked it up and looked inside. He found 57 U.S. cents. That's about 45 eurocents. And there was a note, scribbled in Hattie Mae's childish handwriting. It said, "I want to give this money to help build the little church bigger so more children can go to Sunday school."

Her parents told the pastor that their daughter had saved that 45 eurocents for 2 years.

The next Sunday Pastor Conwell took the note and the cracked, red pocketbook to the pulpit. He told the story of Hattie Mae's death, and her unselfish love and devotion to Jesus. He challenged his deacons to get busy and raise enough money for the larger building that the little girl dreamed of.

Well...a newspaper heard about the story and published it. A wealthy estate agent read that story. And the estate agent offered to give the church a very large piece of land for a lot less money than it was really worth. That land would have been perfect for the new church.

But the people who were responsible for the church had a meeting. They decided to thank the estate agent and told him they could not even afford the

good deal he was offering. So he sold it to them for...57 American cents, 45 eurocents.

Well...the church members were really excited. They made large donations of money. Checks came from everywhere. In 5 years the building fund had the parcel of land and \$200,000 American dollars, which is about \$158,000 euros. That money was worth a lot more in the late 1800s than it is today. Hattie May's unselfish faith in Jesus, her love and generosity and the seed she planted had paid huge dividends.

Today Temple Baptist Church seats 3,300 people. From that arose Temple University. Today 34,000 students are educated there. Then there's also Temple Baptist Hospital...and a Sunday school building that houses hundreds of children.

In conclusion, I urge you to find a place for the saints in your spiritual life. Make some of them your heroes. Google them and then read about them and be inspired. There is a Church of England Website that shows the saints we celebrate. It is called Exciting Holiness. If it is your "thing," ask a saint to intercede with God for what you are praying for. And most importantly, that YOU strive for sainthood.