

Rev. Dr. Jill Rierdan, Supply Priest
All Saints Episcopal Church/South Burlington VT
November 3, 2024
All Saints' Sunday

On Sundays when we celebrate the Feast of All Saints, we often sing the hymn “I sing a song of the Saints of God,” just as we did this morning. The hymn lists saints from different occupations: Doctor, Queen, Shepherdess, Soldier, Priest, and slain by a fierce wild beast.

Have you ever wondered why the writer of the words to this hymn chose Doctor, Queen, Shepherdess, Soldier, Priest, and—not to forget--being slain by a fierce wild beast? (If you have, I ask your patience.) The saintly occupations mentioned in this hymn were associated with actual people in Christian history.

The doctor refers to the gospel writer Luke. We are told that Luke was born in Antioch, in Syria, in the first century, and was a man of many talents. He was not only a writer of gospels and a painter, but also a physician—a doctor. And, a saint.

The queen refers to Margaret of Scotland, who was born in 1045. She is known for her mission to help the poor and orphans.

The shepherdess refers to Joan of Arc, who was born in France around 1412. She lived in the country and probably herded sheep and worked in orchards like other children. But from the time she was thirteen, Joan felt she had a special calling from God to help save her country from its enemies. She rode in many battles and helped win victories, but was captured and put to death. She is remembered for her courage and faithfulness.

John Donne is the priest that this hymn refers to. He was born in 1573. At first he was a writer and poet and then he was encouraged to become a priest where he won fame throughout England as a fine preacher who spoke the word of God.

And the final saint mentioned in the hymn is Saint Ignatius, bishop of the Christian Community at Antioch, who died about 115 years after the birth of Christ. At the time he was bishop, the Romans were determined to wipe out Christianity and they seized Ignatius and condemned him to death. He was

thrown to the wild beasts in the Coliseum in Rome and, indeed, was slain by a fierce wild beast.

So the hymn that we sing teaches us about some of the saints. All the ones mentioned in the hymn are dead, and all are famous. But that is true of only some of our saints.

Now, I do not mean to disrespect the reality of persecution and martyrdom for some Christians, right up to the present. I do, though, want to mourn the fact that saints seem irrelevant to many Christians today.

Because Saints have so much to teach us about living, not simply about dying. Saints have so much to teach us about being part of the human community, rather than about being a very special individual. There is a *Communion* of saints, not a list of saints.

The Book of Common Prayer, on page 862 of the Catechism, tells us that

The communion of saints is the whole family of God, the living and the dead, those whom we love and those whom we hurt, bound together in Christ by sacrament, prayer, and praise.

Saints are people who have come to embrace and live out their true lives, the life they were meant to live. The life that glorifies God. Saints are people who “make real choices ... after [they] have come to accept fully who [they] are with both the possibilities and limitations. As Saint Irenaeus wrote, the glory of God is the person fully themselves.

Lest you worry, listening to me, as people grow into their sainthood, they not only embrace THEIR true lives more and more, to the glory of God, but they help OTHERS become more themselves, too.

Some of us here recognize that we have had saints in our lives who have helped us become more ourselves. They may have been parents or other family members, including our children. They helped us become more fully who God created us to be. Some of us had teachers or coaches or ministers or therapists or community or political leaders who saw our real selves and helped us love ourselves and others as God loves us and all God’s children. And some of us have been helped by saints we have never actually met—

artists, and composers, and musicians, and writers, poets—saints who created works that led some of us to recognize ourselves and our world in arts and music and literature so as to live more fully.

This shouldn't surprise us. The Bible, after all, contains poetry and eloquent prose. Jesus, the Incarnate Word, told stories, spoke in parables. He knew that story and poems inspire us to become more ourselves as God created us to be.

This morning, we acknowledge and pray for the saints among us who have died as we read the names of members of this congregation, family members, and dear friends. And we acknowledge the saints among us who are still alive, as well.

And I invite you to pray for the sainthood of others, most especially, on this All Saints Sunday, for candidates for public office. May those seeking to lead others do so with a sense of loving community concerned for the well-being of all God's children.