

THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

Few of us like the thought of being alone. It makes a difference to know someone is with you. We can even become disheartened in a group, if the group is small and numbers are declining. And in the church today, numbers are declining, in the Western World at any rate. Many of us have to face the situation where there are so many people “out there” and so few “in here”, and not enough to do all the jobs that have to be done. But that is not the whole picture. Throughout the world, the church is growing. We are part of a fellowship millions strong! And its even greater than that. Not only are we part of a fellowship that spreads throughout the world. We are part of a fellowship that transcends the boundaries of time. Think of the biggest crowd you have ever seen: a mega rock concert, a World Cup Final, the Olympics, whatever. Think of the kind of buzz you can get from being part of such a large crowd. The Christian Church is a much larger crowd than that. We are part of a fellowship which includes not only everyone who calls on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, but also everyone who ever *has* called upon His name throughout the ages, who worship God together with us – present in spirit if not in body. This is what the creed calls “the communion (or fellowship) of saints”. But who are these saints? They are just ordinary Christians. Some did great deeds: they may have died for their faith or taken God’s message to a foreign land where it had not been previously heard. But others are just ordinary believers who lived faithfully for God and died without ever being known outside their own small circle. None of them, even the famous ones (one might say “especially the famous ones”) were absolutely perfect in every way. They were only too human, and had their faults, as we do. But they faithfully carried the torch of the light of God to the end of their lives, and now they worship God in glory. But they also join with us in our worship. We have fellowship with them. But what kind of fellowship is this?

1. A Fellowship of Holiness

They point the way for us to go. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews describes this fellowship when he says: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” Often this verse is misunderstood to be painting a picture which our American cousins refer to as “the heavenly ball-game” (UK “heavenly football match”), with ourselves as the players on the field and the saints as the spectators in the stand. Actually, the writer of Hebrews knew nothing about football (US or UK), and so would have been more likely to think about an athletics contest. But in any case, this is unlikely to have been what was in the writer’s mind. The word translated “witnesses” (Gk. *martyrs*, from which we get “martyr”), in Greek at that time did not mean “spectator”, any more than the word “witness” normally bears this meaning in English. The primary reference of both word is to the law courts. It refers to a person giving evidence, for or against someone, or “witnessing” to what they have seen and heard. These saints are not “witnessing” our struggle. They are witnessing to Jesus, and what they have seen him do in their lives. They are seeking to help us by showing how Jesus led them and helped them, in the hope that we will follow their example and enter their Master’s glory with them. If we look to them, ordinary humans just like us, they can show us, how to put off all sin and everything that hinders us as we seek to live for Christ, and how to keep on running the race with perseverance to the end

2. A Fellowship of Grace

We share with them a reliance on the grace and power of Jesus. We are urged to “fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.” They could not live for Christ and serve Him in

their own strength, and neither can we. Even some of the most famous saints showed obvious human weakness. John Mark, according to Acts 13: 13 could not “stand the heat” of Paul’s missionary activity and gave up the job before it was finished. Later Paul fell out with Barnabas over this very matter (Barnabas wanted to give the lad a second chance, Paul refused). Paul and Peter were given to losing their temper. But John Mark wrote the Gospel that bears his name, and Paul and Peter were the acknowledged leaders of the early church, being responsible between them for much of the early spread of the Christian faith. And Paul and Mark ended up being firm friends (see Colossians 4: 10-11, 2 Timothy 4:11). This could only be done with the help of God. The saints show us how we must “fix our eyes upon Christ” – not only because He is the “witness *par excellence*” (He too, as perfect man shows us how it is possible to live for God, and sets us the best example of all), but because He alone can give us the strength through the Holy Spirit to live the kind of life God wants us to live and to do the work He calls us to do. The saints help us to realise how much we depend on the grace of God.

3. A Fellowship of Glory

Because the saints are already with God in His heavenly glory, they remind those of us still struggling here below of our destination. They show us where we are heading. By joining us in our worship, heaven and earth are bound together. As William Walsham How puts it: “O blest communion, fellowship divine! We feebly struggle: they in glory shine. Yet all are one in thee, for all are thine. Alleluia!” St. Paul says: “And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.” He appears to be saying we are in some mystical sense already in the heavenly places, because he has lived, died, and risen again, and taken our human nature with him into glory with the Father. Thus we are bound ever more tightly into fellowship with all who are Christ’s who have gone before. As Charles Wesley has it:

One family we dwell in him,
One church, above, beneath,
Though now divided by the stream,
The narrow stream of death:
One army of the living God,
To his command we bow;
Part of his host have crossed the flood,
And part are crossing now. (*Hymns and Psalms* 812, v.2)

And they remind us that we will join them in that glorious place, if we follow their example and faithfully live for God and serve Him to our lives end

Yet she on earth has union
With God the Three in One,
And mystic sweet communion
With those whose rest is won.
O happy ones and holy!
Lord, give us grace that we,
Like them, the meek and lowly,
On high may dwell with thee. (Samuel John Stone)

