

## All Saints

Ten days ago Lynn and I were in Rome. One of the places we visited was the Vatican Museum, the home to many medieval religious paintings. The one that made the most impression on me was a rather gory one entitled *The Flaying of St Bartholomew*. It showed the apostle undergoing execution by having his skin peeled off – rather like I might skin a dead fish. It was quite shocking.

Since coming home I have been browsing the internet and have discovered that there are statues depicting the same revolting execution in Milan and in Chatsworth – the latter by Damian Hirst entitled *Exquisite Pain*. Of the statue in Milan Mark Twain, the American novelist, wrote,

The figure was that of a man without a skin; with every vein, artery, muscle, every fibre and tendon and tissue of the human frame represented in minute detail. It looked natural, because somehow it looked as if it were in pain. .... It is hard to forget repulsive things.

(Twain, *Innocents Abroad*, Chapter 18).

I am not particularly concerned with why we as human beings like looking at such things: after all I watched a TV drama last week which focused on men being murdered with a blow torch or with a chain saw or by being drowned in whisky. Human beings are drawn towards the gory. What interested me was that this picture was in the Vatican. It was a Christian picture in a Christian context. It was somehow considered to be uplifting, encouraging.

I am not entirely sure that I am happy with the message being conveyed. Given that saints are meant to be admired and even emulated, I drew the inference that unless we are willing to be flayed alive then we are not real Christians. One could even infer that unless we have been flayed alive we are not real Christians. The problem we have, then, is that St Bartholomew is so good, so self sacrificial that he ceases to be an effective role model. He is too good.

That can be true of saints generally: they are willing to be eaten by lions, burnt at the stake, crucified or disemboweled. And when I reflect on their

lives as portrayed in art my response is, 'If that is sainthood, I do not want it.'

But it is not just saints in medieval art who seem to live in a different world from me. I remember, forty years ago when I was a student, meeting a contemporary whose devotion to the poor was so absolute that I found him utterly depressing. I felt that I could never live up to his standards.

And, fortunately, that is not sainthood. Or rather it is not the whole picture. There is more to the lives of the saints; and there is more to be said about us.

Let me begin with the saints – whether those long past or those we might know now. Sometimes the sacrifices were not what we might have expected. For example, on 7th March 203 six young converts to Christianity were executed in Tunis, Tunisia. Two of them, Perpetua and Felicity, held hands as the lions ran towards them. You may think there was nothing strange about that – except that Felicity was Perpetua's slave. They met death as equals. That was what the Christian gospel meant to them.

The saints are holy; they have lived sacrificial lives. But they were human as well – they had feet of clay. And the feet of clay matter. It matters that Peter, first among the apostles, the first Bishop of Rome, denied Jesus three times; it matters that Thomas did not believe the other disciples had met Jesus; it matters that before they had arrived in Jerusalem Thomas took it for attested that they would all die together. It matters that Paul, that indefatigable traveller and writer should confess to the Corinthians:

And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling.

1 Cor 2:1-3

It is really quite startling that, when he went to visit Corinth, Paul, who travelled the whole known world, who wrote with such confidence, who founded churches in many major cities, who, in the end, did die for his faith, it matters that he was scared. Paul is not invincible; Paul is not fearless; Paul is utterly lacking in self confidence. Just like me. Just like you.

Even Jesus had to live with this same lack of self-confidence on at least one occasion. On the cross he cried out

My God, My God, why have you forsaken me.

Matthew 27:45

The author of the Letter to the Hebrew expands this and tells us that

We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin....In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.

Hebrews 4:15-16 and 5:7

And Paul's response to this is at the heart of sainthood, for he chooses to rely on the power of the defeated Christ. In writing to the Corinthians he continues,

I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.

1 Corinthians 2:4-5

Sainthood is not about superhuman goodness or superhuman power. It is about the power of the Spirit. And the Spirit of Jesus is available to every one of us if we will allow him to fill us. John the Baptist got it right when he said

[Jesus] must grow more and I must grow less. John 3:30

Writing, again to the Corinthians, Paul used a lovely image of the relationship between Jesus and us:

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.

2 Corinthians 4:7-10

We are made of clay; but we are filled with the Spirit of Jesus.

So any understanding of sainthood must include the knowledge that real saints are as human and fallible as we are.

But our response to the saints must also be seen in the context of St Paul's teaching about the Body of Christ. In brief this is that we all have a different part to play and just as the ear should not feel inferior to the eye so none of us should feel inferior to any other Christians. It would be absurd for an ear to want to be able to see – and yet Christians can feel that they should live their lives like some other Christian whom they regard as a kind of model. I can feel that I am inadequate because my life is not like that of Joe Soap. St Paul's message is that what matters is that I follow my calling and you follow yours and that we both do it to the best of our abilities. For example, Mother Theresa was called to live her life in the slums of Calcutta: that does not mean that I am called to do the same. In fact it would be quite absurd every Christian in the world went to live in Calcutta: Leeds and Bradford would be deserted! If we return to the example of St Bartholomew, he died for his faith because that was his calling. Martyrdom was his gift. It not your gift. It is not my gift. It is not your calling. It is not my calling. We imitate St Bartholomew not by dying but by following where Christ calls us.

Sainthood is about being willing to rely on the power of the Spirit and to follow where the Spirit leads. On the last day will take our places round the throne of God and we will now that Jesus was with us at the beginning and will be with us at the end.

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