

“I Sing a Song of the Saints of God.” The Rev. Dr. Andrew Armond (6/18/2023, The Third Sunday after Pentecost)

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You may or may not have a favorite hymn. Many of you may still be learning the hymns of the Episcopal Church, which tend to have a different heritage than the hymns you may have grown up with in other traditions. I know this was true for me, and yet, since I at one time was also an organist and choirmaster in an Episcopal church, I got to know the hymnal pretty well.

Since the Episcopal Church grew out of the Church of England, many of our hymns come from England as well, where hymn-writing in particular was often a hobby for women. In fact, before women were able to become deaconesses and eventually deacons and priests in the Church, hymn-writing was one of the primary means through which women could participate in the teaching vocation within the church.

One of those women was Mrs. Lesley Locket Scott, born in 1898. She had married an Anglican clergyman, and she would often write hymns for her children for fun—they would ask her to write a hymn for a picnic, or for a foggy day, or for any occasion.

And so Mrs. Scott ended up writing one of those hymns on the subject of the saints. She wrote it as a private hymn for her children, but it later ended up being published by her in 1929, along with several of her other hymns.

And in England, at least, this hymn became very well known. It's sung in the US as well—I've heard it sung in Episcopal schools, at least, but much less frequently in the Episcopal Church.

The thrust of the hymn is a beautiful sentiment—that the saints of God are not merely people frozen in some kind of legendary past, but they were actual people, living, breathing, real people, who experienced the amazing love of God and shared it with the people around them. Sometimes in truly extraordinary ways, and sometimes in very ordinary ways. And Mrs. Scott's point is that both types of faithfulness are honored by God: both types of faithfulness, in fact, form the substance of what we mean when we talk about saints, sainthood, sanctity.

1 I sing a song of the saints of God,
patient and brave and true,
who toiled and fought and lived and died
for the Lord they loved and knew.
And one was a doctor, and one was a queen,
and one was a shepherdess on the green;

they were all of them saints of God, and I mean,
God helping, to be one too.

2 They loved their Lord so dear, so dear,
and his love made them strong;
and they followed the right for Jesus' sake
the whole of their good lives long.
And one was a soldier, and one was a priest,
and one was slain by a fierce wild beast;
and there's not any reason, no, not the least,
why I shouldn't be one too.

3 They lived not only in ages past;
there are hundreds of thousands still.
The world is bright with the joyous saints
who love to do Jesus' will.
You can meet them in school, or in lanes or at sea,
in church, or in trains or in shops or at tea,
for the saints of God are just folk like me,
and I mean to be one too.

We gather today to do something rather remarkable, which is
to honor the patron saint of this Church, St. Alban.

Alban was most likely a Roman soldier living in Britain in the 2nd or 3rd century AD. At this time, though there were Christians in Britain, Christianity was not legal in the Roman Empire. Any type of public celebration of Eucharist was punishable by death, mainly because Christianity continued to be seen as a threat to the values and virtues of Rome.

Rome stood for strength, for order, for an unbroken line of tradition that carried the Divine Emperors all the way back to the Gods and Goddesses themselves. The Emperors were worshipped as Divine. They were called “Lord and Savior of the Universe.”

And so when Christians broke bread, and drank wine, and proclaimed in their Creeds that Jesus was the Lord and Savior, that the Risen Christ was the Creator of All Things, and that to follow Jesus was to be a citizen of God’s Kingdom, this was problematic, to say the least.

As a soldier in the army of Rome, Alban stood for another set of values. And yet, one day, a priest of this forbidden religion (actually, the Romans called Christianity a superstition, not even giving it the title of a true religion) came across Alban’s doorstep. He needed help, he needed safety, he needed sanctuary, and so Alban hid him in his home, coming to his assistance.

Over the next few days, Alban wanted to learn more about the Jesus that Amphibilus, the priest, worshipped. And so Amphibilus shared the Gospel with Alban, baptized him, and Alban became a Christian.

When the Roman authorities came looking for Amphibilus, Alban had exchanged clothing with him, claiming to be the Christian priest. And so Alban was led away to be executed for the heinous crime of claiming Jesus to be the Lord and Savior.

Alban's last words were: "I worship and adore the true and living God, who created all things."

Alban's own executioner was so moved by his witness that he could not bring himself to carry out the sentence of death, and so he, too, was killed. A few days later, Amphibilus was found and also killed, and so, as the story goes, these were the first three British martyrs: Alban, the unnamed executioner, and Amphibilus, the priest.

There are several reasons the story of Alban is so powerful, but the one that stands out to me most of all is that, by one view, Alban was a complete and utter failure.

He was only a Christian for a few days. He died at the hands of the Romans, who executed hundreds of thousands of prisoners over the course of their dominion over the world.

And the person that he was trying to save from death was executed anyway, just a few days later. What was it all for? What was the point?

You may have seen the bumper sticker “Christians aren’t perfect, just forgiven.”

And yet: how many of us still struggle with perfectionism?

How many of us still struggle with the concept of failure as something shameful, something to be avoided at all costs, something that automatically disqualifies us at least in the eyes of the world, if not the eyes of God?

How many of us still struggle with not being enough—not daring enough, not beautiful enough, not smart enough, not talented enough, not outgoing enough, just not . . . enough?

What if, instead, as Paul reminds us in our Scriptures today, we are justified by faith—and what if we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand?

What if our boast is in the hope of sharing the glory of God?

What if, while we were weak—that is, **in the middle of** our very imperfection—Christ died for us?

What if Jesus, when he sees us, has compassion for us, because we are harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd?

What if God isn't asking us for perfection, but only faithfulness? Even faithfulness in very small ways?

I'm reminded of the fact that the English word "perfect" comes from the Latin word that means "complete." If you've ever studied another language, or gotten really into English grammar, you may be familiar with a perfect tense, in which we refer to an action that has been completed at some point in the past.

To be perfect is really to be finished. To be complete. To be whole. And none of us is finished yet.

In this sense, all of us are failures, and to be a Christian is to embrace our imperfection. It is to embrace our limitations. It is to live into the fact that we are not in control of our lives, or our destiny, or of the people around us. And when we try to control those things, when we try to bring about some kind of coherence or perfection, we will, inevitably, fail.

You may have heard it said that “God won’t give you more than you can handle.”

But I don’t think that’s true.

I think we all have had those moments where we have realized this, where we have been completely overwhelmed by circumstances beyond our control, or even those that seem within our grasp, and we cry out to God: I need You. I can’t handle this!

Life will give us more than we can handle.

And what our faith teaches is that, when this happens, Jesus is there, right there, in the middle of it, staying close to us, seeing us with the eyes of Divine Compassion, Divine Understanding, Divine Light, Divine Forgiveness.

For some of us, for most of us, in fact, sainthood won’t be found in a heroic act of martyrdom.

For some of us, sainthood might look like getting out of bed when depression is hanging heavy over us and sapping our lives of energy and strength.

For some of us, sainthood might look like allowing the waves of grief to wash over us and to mourn a recent, or even not-so-recent, loss of a loved one.

For some of us, sainthood might look like not having a brave face in the midst of a frightening diagnosis, but admitting out loud to ourselves and our loved ones, “I’m scared.”

For some of us, sainthood might look like patience, loving the unlovable people God puts in our path on a regular basis.

St. Teresa of Avila, one of my favorite saints, defines sanctity as merely learning “to know ourselves and [to] do what we can—namely, surrender our will and fulfill God’s will in us.”

In 16th century Spain, there was a boy named Alfonso whose father was a successful cloth merchant. Alfonso had a passionate Christian faith and seemingly had a vocation to the priesthood, but his father died when he was 12 and he abruptly had to quit his studies and help his mother run the family business. He married at 27 and had three children, but his wife and children all passed away. The business fell apart, and Alfonso was utterly destitute, both spiritually and physically.

He turned to the Jesuits, who helped him embrace his destitution and who led him in a life of prayer. Alfonso developed an intimate and heartfelt faith in the God who

seemingly had abandoned him, and he still desired to live out his life as a priest in the Church.

But that never happened. In this respect, Alfonso was a failure. He never reached his goal. The Jesuits did make Alfonso a lay brother in the order, and they sent him to Majorca, where he became a door-keeper at the college there. He never achieved anything noble or glorious for the rest of his life: but he welcomed each guest as though they were Jesus himself. The students, over time, saw a calm, patient, yet holy flame in Alfonso, and he became a dearly beloved spiritual counselor and member of the community.

All Alfonso learned to do was to follow Jesus, to allow the grace of God to wash over him, even though he had clearly received more than he was able to handle.

So may it be for each one of us. We are not perfect, not one of us: and yet, we are each beloved saints of God. And that is good enough. It is more than good enough. We receive the graces of God through baptism, and we are born again into the sainthood of God's Kingdom. Each one of us is in process, in the middle, of being molded and shaped into precisely what God intends for us to be: saints.

AMEN.