

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	2 November 2025
Service:	Eucharist, All Saints' Day
Preacher:	The Dean, The Very Revd Dr Edward Dowler

The Greek *hagioi* means 'the holy ones', and although normally translated as 'saints', this is the word that the New Testament uses to describe all of God's holy people, who have come through baptism and their Christian discipleship to share in God's life. So, although we may not feel like saints in the normal way that we think of that term, in fact all of us are called to be saints. The people we usually call saints such as Mary or our own St Wilfrid or St Richard are those whom the Church has specifically recognised to be among God's holy ones. But all of us share that same calling to be numbered among God's holy people.

Today I'd like to think about the saints as friends. Friendship is very important to almost everyone. In the view of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, if you want to have a happy and fulfilled life, friendship is essential. 'Without friends', he wrote, 'no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods'.

First of all, the saints are friends with God. Friendship with God has some obvious differences from other types of friendship, and yet some important features of normal friendship apply to both.

For one thing, we like to be in our friends' company and, in the case of true friends, we are content to be so without needing to impress or entertain them all the time. When you sit down with a friend, say to have a meal or watch something on television, you are simply content to be with them; to be in their company. A very helpful comment I've heard about prayer is similar to this. When you pray, you are putting yourself into the presence of a friend: you don't necessarily need to concentrate on God one hundred per cent of the time, just as you would not concentrate on a friend you were sitting with all time you are with them. It is enough just to be with God and feel comfortable in his presence.

Another thing we try to do for our friends is to help them; to do things for them. The saints also try to help God when they can. They do this, as we hear in today's gospel, by being peacemakers, by being pure in heart, by suffering persecution for the cause of righteousness and in countless other ways.

So the saints are friends with God and, saying the same thing in a slightly different way, the saints are also friends with Christ

In Jesus's own ministry as we hear about it in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John friendship was so important. As with many teachers in the ancient world, Jesus gathered a group of friends around him so that he could teach and encourage them. On the times when I have been on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, this is what always strikes me about the region around the Sea of Galilee in the Holy Land. In these places it becomes very real to you as you visit the towns, villages and countryside around which that group of friends walked and talked with their teacher and lord.

And the gospels tell us that Jesus's friendship was not exclusively concentrated on an in-group of like-minded disciples but extended to those who were beyond the pale in the Jewish world: to prostitutes, tax collectors and sinners. They were also his friends as he called these most unlikely people into his circle, and they found themselves chosen, loved and transformed by the encounter. And the night before his crucifixion, Jesus reiterates the importance of friendship. We hear in St John's gospel that he says to his disciples: 'I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.' In this discourse, Jesus widens out that circle of friends that we read about in the New Testament to include all of us in that circle of friendship. This is most clearly expressed when we gather at the Lord's table for the Eucharist: here we are his group of friends with our host in the midst of us.

If the saints are friends with God and friends with Christ they are also friends with one another.

All Saints Day reminds us that we belong, as our first reading from the book of Revelation puts it, to 'a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb'. Artists through the centuries have loved to try their hands at depicting that scene of an innumerable group of friends, standing all together, in solidarity with one another, waving their palm branches around the throne of Jesus the lamb and crying out 'Blessing and glory and wisdom and

thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.'

And finally the saints are friends with us: not just people who have passed away and vanished for ever, but our friends and companions on our own journey. As a contrast to this, I always think of another Greek philosopher called Plotinus, who lived about 250 years before the time of the New Testament. Plotinus wrote about the spiritual journey of the soul to God as being 'of the alone to the alone'. In other words, each of us is at the end of the day completely alone – an isolated individual – and we are seeking for our souls to ascend to God who is also completely alone. Many of us who are so influenced by western individualism may think that feels quite an accurate picture of how we see our own journey.

But the Bible and the Church have a much richer social vision: we are never just the alone seeking the alone, but always in the company of a great cloud of witnesses. Look around the cathedral: not to mention the gathered congregation of all of us, we have statues of saints like those of Mary and Richard of Chichester. We have stained glass windows depicting many saints and other biblical figures; reliefs of Mary, Martha and Lazarus the Evangelist, modern paintings of John the Baptist and Mary Magdalen. Just as we might have pictures of our friends and family displayed at home, all these are specifically designed to remind us that the saints too are our friends and family who, in God's nearer presence, pray for us. And that they lead us in their great company by their teaching and their example on our shared pilgrimage towards his heavenly kingdom.