

OUR PLACE IN THE SAINTS
Rev. Gary Magarrell – July 12, 2009

We gather here in this sanctuary week by week as members, adherents and visitors to this congregation to ensure we remain centred in what we are about as followers of the Christ Jesus call Lord. We sing loud praises to our God. As I have had the privilege from time to time to be a member of the United Church national staff and to lead congregations in Ontario and British Columbia, services of worship have always blessed me. They are ever varied, led by a multitude of voices in leadership with great music to accompany us as together we sing out our faith in community.

In Christian churches big and small, across the globe and in this sanctuary, I feel the presence of those who have worshipped here and now have gone before us. These are the saints, those who have lived their lives in new ways because they have known and been in relationship with our God.

I remember back to the early 60s to my days in theological training at United College in Winnipeg. We often had joint classes with St. John's Anglican Theological College particularly in the study of the history and liturgy of the early church. One year we were fortunate to have as professor of Early Church History Phillip Carrington, a man in his 80s who had retired as Anglican Archbishop of Quebec. He was a published and respected author of many books on the period, with special emphasis on the time of Christ until Constantine.

He loved the subject of hagiology, the study of the holy literature and legends on the lives of the saints. The word hagiology comes from the word hagios which means holy. Archbishop Carrington challenged us to put away our scepticism for a time as we looked at the lives of some of the early church leaders and martyrs. His stories brought them alive and he often wept as he described what was known of their stand for their faith in tumultuous times. He even had written in Greek by hand on scrolls the four gospels to get a feel for what the task involved.

Today we might snicker at this. However, when in the presence of this godly man, the lives he related to us came alive as never before. Since then, I have had a high regard for the history of Christians over the past 2000 years, for it is a chronicle of the faith of thousands of individuals living out their life in communion with God.

A student of the so called Christian era knows only too well that the church has never had an easy time in history. There was a time when all citizens in the West were expected to be a part of the church; today church worship attendance is often a minority choice.

Many of us are privileged to travel and experience other cultures and different ways of life. I am always conscious when I enter churches in Europe of the length of time worship has continued in these places.

In March of this year, I had the opportunity to visit the Italian city of Siena. As I entered the Cathedral, the guide stated with pride that the Lord's Supper had been celebrated in that building everyday since 1170. In hearing this statement, one becomes immediately conscious of the thousands of worshippers who have gone before us. So loved was this Cathedral, that in 1339 plans were made and the foundation laid to double its size. What could stop them? The faithful citizens and the wealthy classes were determined to see it built. Surely, it would rival the Cathedral in Florence.

Then in 1348, the plague hit Siena. The city of 100,000 people was decimated. At the end of the plague, only 30,000 citizens remained. The Cathedral expansion was put on hold and has been so for 700 years. God and the people would have to remain content with the original cathedral where mass continues to be celebrated daily.

Into this city was born a woman named Catherine in 1347, one year before the plague. She was the youngest of 25 children and was a studious, pious, and learned girl. Even as an early teen, she worked tirelessly among the plague ravished city and quickly got a reputation for goodness and piety.

By the age of 19, Catherine of Siena was an avid letter writer to church authorities locally and across Europe. These letters were often addressed to the pope. The Dominicans once took her to Florence to try her as a heretic but discovered she was no heretic but a very orthodox woman of faith. Catherine only lived until she was 33 years of age but her influence across Europe was remarkable. Over 400 of her letters are still in existence.

Catherine was very upset that the popes had left Rome and moved to Avignon in France – her powerful words and visits with the pope helped convince him to move the See back to Rome. The church hierarchy were amazed by her boldness. Though her followers were many, she never founded a religious order for she believed a true servant of God must be in the world in order to serve.

Let me share with you excerpts from two of her letters. The first letter was sent to her friend Augustinian Friar Felice da Massa in 1377 who had travelled to Avignon with her to see the pope:

And let the truth be your delight; let it always be in your mouth, and proclaim it when it is needed. Proclaim it lovingly and to everyone, especially those whom you love with a special love---but with a certain congeniality, putting the shortcomings of the other person on your own shoulders. If in the past you haven't done it as sensitively as you should, let's do better in the future.

The second comes from a letter to the Pope then resident in Avignon:

If till now you haven't been very firm in truth, I want you, I beg you, for the little time that is left, to be so---courageously and like a brave man---following Christ, whose vicar you are....

Don't be afraid, for divine help is near. Just attend to spiritual affairs, to appointing good pastors and administrators in your cities, for you have experienced rebellion because of bad pastors and administrators. Do something about it! And take heart in Christ Jesus and don't be afraid.

Pursue and finish with true holy zeal what you have begun by holy intent---I mean your return [to Rome] and the sweet holy crusade. Delay no longer, for your delaying has already been the cause of a lot of trouble....

Up, father! No more irresponsibility!

Forgive me father, for talking to you like this. Out of the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks, you know. I am sure that if you are the kind of tree I want you to be, nothing will stand in your way.

When she died at 33, her influence was felt all over Europe. Though a woman and an untrained theologian, she joins St. Francis as the co-patron saints of Europe.

In the 1300s, women had no legal status, nor were they taken seriously as church leaders or theologians. Yet here we have young Catherine who many today consider the most influential woman in the history of the church.

I raise this story of St. Catherine of Siena as it reminds us that we need to know of these people who were bold in their time. We are called to be **bold** in the time in which **we** live. We need to be practical but we need to dream and plan for a future we will not experience ourselves.

The original dreamers who set out to build any cathedral never lived to see the finished product nor did they expect to do so. They trusted future generations to be faithful to the plan and to build on the foundations they had built. We know by our tours of some of these great buildings that future generations utilized the foundations but put the stamp of their era and faith expression on their building. Many cathedrals have contained within them medieval, classical and baroque styles to name but a few. Yet they are all a part of the cathedral planned many centuries before. If the foundations were firm, and the plans well articulated, future generations would be able to build on the early work.

We live in a time when the familiar markings of cultural Christianity are disappearing. The culture has changed around us. Diversity has replaced homogeneity. Christendom is no more as many of us have known it.

So, what is God telling us to do in this time? Is he promising us any more clarity for the future than in generations past? I hardly think this is the case.

Like Catherine of Siena, we need to move boldly forward, dealing with the issues of our day and laying the foundations to ensure the future of our church. None of us can be

sure where God will lead the church but we can be sure that God will lead it to new endeavours of service and faith.

The Hebrew word for saint meant one who is holy or set apart. Originally, the Old Testament used the word saint for those specially dedicated to God and consecrated to God's service. Then the Holy One became more a term used for Israel as God's people. God is holy, therefore you are holy. Holiness was seen as that special quality of the faithful remnant of Israel. This was a reference to the loyal nucleus of God's people especially those who remained steadfast in times of trouble and persecution.

In the New Testament, Paul in his letter to the Philippians (1:1) claims we are saints by virtue of being in Christ Jesus. Our holiness is in respect of God's calling; we have a vocation as a consecrated people. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church, (1 Cor.1:2) he states that the Corinthian church consists of those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints. In Paul's usage, saint naturally becomes a common term for the members of the church. The term saint is particularly associated with the love shown by Christians to one another, demonstrated in practical service.

So, we are a part of the great assembly of the saints who have honoured God.

Let us not shy away from this word saint nor forget those who have led the way in very difficult times so that we may know the story of the Creator God, the loving Christ and be embolden by the Spirit of God which moves in and among us.

We ruminate on the difficult times in which the church operates. It is times like these we need lessons from the past and a strong faith in God's ability to create a future for the church in whatever form it may one day take.

You and I can not see the future but we can in faith assist committed people to invest in the future of God's church whatever for that may be. Not knowing absolutely does not stop us from our belief in the goodness and wisdom of God as he leads his church. All of us are investors in the future that the faith we have in Christ may be available to future generations.

I welcome the opportunity to walk in faith with each of you in the months ahead. It will be an adventure where we need faith in one another, tolerance and belief in the importance of what we do in this place. If we radiate the faith, others will be attracted to join us.

As I come to be with you in August, I trust we will go boldly forward into the future building on the work that has gone before.

It can be exciting – I invite you along in my faith journey as together, we witness to the Christ in our time and in this place. Amen