

All Saints Year C

A couple of quiz questions to start us off this morning...how good are you at collective nouns?

Can you add the object to these nouns...

A pride of

A pod of

A kindness of

I found some good new ones yesterday on Google

How about

An absence of waiters

A body of pathologists

An embarrassment of parents

A fidget of choristers

So what is the collective noun for saints.....?

Almighty God you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship.

So began the collect for today.

And then there is the conclusion of the creed we use at Evensong: I believe in the Holy Spirit,

the holy catholic church,

the communion of saints,

the forgiveness of sins,

the resurrection of the body,

and life everlasting

What is embedded in our faith is not just the idea of individual saints: the huge range of Christ's followers who have gone ahead of us in faith and whose witness continues to be powerfully effective. It is the idea of the saints en masse..a communion...sorry about the pun.

The term communion of saints first appeared in a sermon by Nicetas of Remesiana in the early 5th century (sermons can occasionally have quite a powerful effect, but Nicetas is not apparently remembered for much apart from this one sermon). What seems to have been emerging in the 5th century is a move from the idea of the saints simply being fellow Christians (see the letter to the Ephesians which we heard today). What was new was the sense of Christians in this world being caught up in something which transcended immediate experience: they were part of something much much bigger, a community which crossed both space and time.

And this community was hugely diverse. Thinking of those remembered in this cathedral, I couldn't easily imagine Martin and Dunstan and Wycliffe and Joan of Arc and Katherine and George being best buddies. But they are in communion.

And the collect offered us another image: you have knit together your elect...wool is knitted into fabric which is much stronger than individual threads. Bones knit together after they have broken, and then break point can be stronger than the original bone. There is something strong about the bond between the elect. But what holds them in community, what knits them together is their common focus on Christ, their common life in Christ, their common worship of Christ. ...not whether they approve of each other...or not.

Those of you who take notice of the goings on in the church may have realised that being in communion is something which is up for debate. Whether you regard being in communion as being in fellowship, in some general way, able to meet together as brothers and sisters in Christ, or being able to receive the bread and wine together, at a Eucharist, there is some unravelling going on. Every ten years the Archbishop of Canterbury invites the bishops of the Anglican Communion to a conference. The original conference was held at Lambeth, hence the name, though now the bishops meet in Canterbury.

And the Church of England benefits hugely from these visits: for instance next July we expect to have here in this diocese bishops from some of the richest and some of the poorest parts of the world. We expect to have the two bishops of Bangladesh, and the Bishop of Central Newfoundland, and the Bishop of Utah, along with bishops from our link dioceses in Japan, India and Tanzania. What a chance to be able to debate the great issues of our time, not least climate change. And it will be interesting to have a woman who is a bishop here. But there is a problem Some Bishops have said they aren't sure whether they are going to attend. Because they are in theological dispute with other Bishops.

I believe that to be profoundly sad, misguided, and wrong.

And I was glad to read a piece on the blog of the Bishop of Buckingham¹ entitled 'What party spirit am I on? : why I am going to Lambeth. He gives three reasons for, as he puts it, being in the party spirit.

1. Because I've been invited. Since 1867 it's been the Archbishop's personal bash. Does it have to be a Big Boys Business meeting for it to be worth my while? I am just not self-regarding enough to mind. If Rowan wants a Vatican Council Theme Party, fine. If he wants to party by showing us his Simpsons Videos, fine. It's his party, not mine. There is a self-important little prat in me who feels business meetings matter more than parties. Jesus disagrees. The Sanhedrin has business meetings on Thursday nights. Jesus has a meal with his friends.
2. .Actually, there are bishops with whom I don't look forward to sitting down. They say some of my African brothers are systematically breaking the Ten Commandments, indulging with their governments in envy, false witness and theft. These are primary moral laws. How do I feel about sitting down with people like that? Well, hang on, how do they feel about sitting down with me? The real question here is, who do I think I am? God? Perhaps we all need a bit of a reality check, here. We all have consciences, and we must all render account. How about I render account for my sins, and they render account for theirs? I overcome my pride and we sit down together, I can listen to their side of the story, learn

¹ bishopalan.blogspot.com: 12 October 2007. There is a fourth section on +Alan's bog outlining his approach to Lambeth resolution 1.10. He is from the Evangelical constituency.

whether what people say about them is true anyway, and then we can pray together, and God will help us both to help each other to walk faithfully as disciples in our different circumstances.

3. .I'm not an Anglican for the sake of being an Anglican, but in order to be a Christian. You always need a higher vision of the kingdom than of the Church, or you cannot begin to understand how to be Church. There are many interesting discussions to be had about contemporary anthropology, post imperialism, and moral theology, but none of those things matters as much to me as what Jesus did on the cross, breaking down every dividing wall, and showing me how to think differently. Why can I not sit down with my colleagues? Hannibal Lecter could talk with Agent Starling. Less facetiously, Ian Paisley can work with Gerry Adams, and F. W deClerk could talk to Nelson Mandela. Thank God. One reason they could, was because Jesus sat down at the Last Supper two along from Judas Iscariot..

I say thank God for the Bishop of Buckingham....

Now what applies to Bishops applies also to each and every Christian community. Congregations are not clubs, held together by rules. We are much more like those who gather this weekend around bonfires, drawn together by the warmth of Christ, some daring to draw close, others hanging back in the shadows, some perhaps walking away, Recent research has shown that people drift away from church for all sorts of reasons: disillusionment with the church, being let down by the church, problems with the leadership, problems with relevance problems with change, problems with liberalism, problems with conservatism.² With that range of factors there is no way we clergy can fence people in.

In the end, all we clergy can do is, inadequately and intermittently show people Jesus.

It is not individual virtue, but Christ who keeps the saints in communion. It is not Rowan, but Christ who will keep the Bishops at Lambeth in communion. It is not the clergy, but Christ who will keep us in communion.

Geoffrey Howard, a Salford priest, tells what that means for him as he administers communion in his downtown parish³.

'As I administer the bread, the first person at the communion rail is Amy, eighty years old. Next to her is 3-year-old Carmen, wanting to receive a blessing. Her sticky fingers clutch a lollipop as she swings on the rail. Brian, a thirty-year-old schoolteacher is next to her. Then comes Henry. He can neither read nor write and lives in a squalid bed-sit. Dulcie, a local journalist is next, and then William, the homeless alcoholic, followed by Susan a single mum. then Paul, an electronic engineer, shoulder to shoulder with Ron, who has recently been convicted of theft.

² **Gone for Good?** Church Leaving and Returning in the 21st Century, Leslie J Francis and Philip J Richter, Epworth, October 2007

³ **Dare to Break Bread:** Eucharist in Desert and in City, Geoffrey Howard, DLT, 1992

One or two of the congregation rarely take a bath, some are fastidiously clean, some refuse the wine when they have a cold, others bring their germs to the cup.

Ernie from the old folks home is the last person at the rail. He can hardly walk and has brain disease. Usually when he drinks, he dribbles. I would give him the sacrament by intinction. But he is my brother in Christ, not my half brother. I give him the chalice. He dribbles. Moments later I consume the elements contaminated wine and all. We are family and we have one cup.

Where Jesus is present and how he is present in the Eucharist is still a mystery to me. But that he is present is beyond doubt. Only Jesus of Nazareth would gather around one table such beautiful and diverse people'.

Vivienne Faul
Leicester Cathedral
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