

## **SERMON FOR ALL SAINTS | 05.11.2017**

**I am afraid we cheated: Maria and I. We had needed to be in Barcelona for a meeting and we thought we would fly across to St James' shrine in Compostella 'on the way home'. An early flight and sunshine when we got there. It had been an easy journey.**

**Unlike those who had walked the Camino. From several towns in France, walking over the Pyrenees and all points east and south, the backpackers were there in force. The rucksacks seemed impossibly balanced with the help of stout sticks and legs made for serious walking. And there in the sun they greeted total strangers like long lost friends, the square outside the huge Baroque cathedral full of people, some slumped on the ground catching their breath but just as many hugging and kissing. And they were international. One group caught my eyes, a pile of Koreans: I don't think they had walked all the way from home!**

**There was a demonstrable sense that 'they had made it' and they made this miniature city into a venue for a huge party, full of grisly stories of blisters and tumbles, soon to be forgotten in the euphoria of arrival.**

***Neville Clark describes heaven in very similar terms. No storm clouds, thunder or lightning. Rather, something like a family festival where God and judgement, Jesus and grace, are inextricably intertwined; where home is the venue, where elder brothers and sisters, long since arrived, act as welcomers and where angelic attendants doubtless look faintly ridiculous in fancy dress. Not too far away the spiritual equivalent of Prosecco (or should that be champagne?) corks are heard popping.***

**Is it too much to imagine that our arrival in heaven will be very similar?**

**I hope not. But the Biblical account grounds all this in reality. While the tableau I have described is what we all hope for, this celebration has been mounted at pretty high - divine - cost. There has been a price for turning the old covenant into the new and all of us need to be aware of what it is.**

**Under the old dispensation Jerusalem's annual Day of Atonement centred on the High Priest's prayers of entreaty on behalf of the people outside in the awesome 'Holy of Holies', the place behind the big curtain where God was deemed to dwell. Under the new covenant, there is open access to the Father's welcoming arms and the Father's house. But the price ... was the death of the High Priest, Jesus, the one who gave his life to make this welcome possible. If there is laughter and a huge sense of relief that the journey is done, it has been bought with tears.**

**And so a kind of re-winding is required. If we are keen on the final hugs and story-telling, then the journey itself has to be a pilgrimage and not just a seat on Easy-Jet. As today's Gospel emphasizes, this is a journey based not on the 'you shall' and 'you shall not' of the Ten Commandments. This isn't a one off event, make or break.**

**This journey, this pilgrimage, is to be found in the tiny steps of each and every day, in the flesh and blood engagements that make up the week past and the week to come. It is about what happens when we review – honestly - every relationship, every conversation, every decision, however minor. In what ways did we respect the weak as well as the poor; affirm the lonely and the irritating as well as the bereaved; show mercy to those who we can't agree with and make peace with those spoiling for a fight?**

**It is these infinitesimally small steps that we call saintliness. And it is much more down to earth than those pious statues inside the Basilica in Compostella might presume. To be a saint is to have slogged away at the small things – in whatever place we find ourselves – so that the image of Christ is gradually taking shape in us and his life is more closely identified with ours. Saints are the ones who can, somehow, sniff the banquet of the kingdom of heaven from a distance!**

**They don't wear a badge and yet what we see in them is something we are all aspiring to. They are the ones who carry Christ's peace in their hearts and minds, the ones who don't run away from the painful attacks that come their way as a result.**

**This time in Compostella we were just observers. But here, here at home, do we sniff the banquet of heaven enough not to cheat, willing instead to put one foot in front of the other in the long haul of becoming God's saints?**