HOMILY FOR ALL SAINTS
1 NOVEMBER 2015 ST BENET’S HALL

The feast of All Saints is the harvest festival of heaven, the autumn ingathering of the hundred fold harvest of the world to come. St John in the Book of Revelation, from which we heard in the first reading, saw ‘a huge number, impossible to count, of people from every nation, race, tribe and language; they were standing in front of the throne and in front of the Lamb’.

This huge variety of the saints, extends even beyond every nation, race, tribe and language, to incorporate – so at least we gather from those canonised and so known to us – to polar opposites in terms of human characteristics. Some are saints young, St Agnes say, St Therese of Lisieux, our parish patron St Aloysius; some (more we may think) only after a long and hard struggle, St Peter, St Paul, St Augustine. Some lived in the desert in the ascetic ways of the hermit or the monk, so St Antony and so many with and after him; others, though the Church has canonised fewer of them, were saints in married life and business: St Thomas More quite deliberately had no monks in his renaissance utopia and was not one himself. Some were clever: St Thomas Aquinas; some found studies a most terrible struggle: St John Vianney. Some are doubters, St Thomas, some are dreamers, the author of our first reading. Some are naturally sweet and this can be the only modern debased definition of plaster cast sanctity but others are refreshingly crotchety and combative: St Jerome and St Wilfrid; for them ‘telling the truth’ was not always so obviously ‘in love’.

This profuse variety – one could go on – is our relief and reassurance. Yet the huge number, both in quantity and type – is yet one in Christ, not reduced in a blender, but both in a richness and a singularity greater than we can perceive, also made one, one Christ. As St John put it in our second reading: ‘all we know is that when it [what we are to be] is revealed we shall be like him because we shall see him as he really is’. We shall see Christ as he really is; we shall be Christ as he really is. All that Christ was in his life on earth and in the saving mystery of his death and resurrection, passes into the *verum corpus* of the Blessed Sacrament upon the altar; and all that Christ is in the Blessed Sacrament of the altar passes into the *verum corpus* of all the saints who make one Christ,
the end point of all our journeying, this great diverse, so apparently contradictory, rabble.

What is, is not what seems. This is the point of the All Saints gospel, the uncomfortable and challenging reversals of the Beatitudes that come to a head in the apparently nonsensical happiness of being persecuted and abused. Saints do not look like the happy and the blessed of the world and they do not feel particularly saintly either. We can maybe just about learn to live with not being considered to be on the world’s celebrity A list of the beautiful, the successful, the popular but being instead humble, gentle, vulnerable, principled, forgiving and so forth. But not to feel within ourselves satisfactorily saintly seems a much harder ask. The rest of the world may mock us, but can we not at least be secure in our own self righteousness. No says Jesus. The sanctity of the saints consists only ever in their total openness to God and his mercy, their recognition that it is ‘Not I but Christ in me’, a centre wholly and completely outside themselves and hidden too. The secret of sanctity God seems to like to keep even from the saints themselves, right up to the last moment.

Graham Greene’s novel *The Power and the Glory* tells the tale of a flawed priest, trying to be brave in a very hostile world and battling demons of lust and drink. He meditates before his execution by the firing squad of a government set on eradicating the Church, on what it is in the end that really matters: ‘He felt only an immense disappointment because he had to go to God empty-handed, with nothing done at all. It seemed to him at that moment that it would have been quite easy to have been a saint. It would have needed only a little self restraint and a little courage. He felt like someone who had missed happiness by seconds at an appointed place. He knew now that at the end there was only one thing that counted – to be a saint.’ Most of us much of the time, not least in this dark age of spiritual battle, will feel the same discouragement, disappointment and depression about our difficulties, inadequacies, failures and betrayals. Yet I think the power and the glory of Greene’s novel is the great love and compassion the reader feels for this tragic failed priest and we are led to see that perhaps this is a human reflection of the great love and compassion of God. It is
upon this, after all, that we all depend. We are pointed to a destination that will not be fully reached within the frame of this life.

The Gospel wants us to be very realistic and honest about ourselves, feeling only a truly sharp pain of self-recognition, knowing that all of us are only ever saints who have been redeemed, never self made, only made so by God. Even our blessed Mother was a redeemed sinner, it just being very mysteriously in her case that the moment of redemption was differently placed than for us. May we know at the end that there is only one thing that counts – to be a saint and may we yet find in this a judgement that heals and saves.