

WEEKLY SERMON

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A company of friends

“But in the account of the burning bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls the Lord “the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.’ (Luke 20.37-38)

One of my favourite devotional books is Robert Atwell’s ‘Celebrating The Saints’. When we pray Morning Prayer together as a senior team on a Thursday morning, I love to reach for ‘Bishop Jill’s Red book’. Guaranteed inspiration; often ancient writing about each of the saints.

Since coming back to Lancashire, I have become more aware of reality behind the line we trip off in the Apostles Creed: “I believe in the communion of saints.” As Jesus puts it: “He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive”.

For some of you who have come to the beautiful ‘Held in God’s Gaze’ Quiet Days at Whalley Abbey, your heart may have been warmed by Rev. Nicholas Heale, introducing us to ‘his friends’.

What if, surrounding us, unseen, there is a company of friends? Wise brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers of faith, behind the veil of time, cheering us on in the race, pointing us always to Jesus.

As Rev. Nicholas Heale put it: “There is no rivalry or tension between them and us, simply a mutual rejoicing. As you sing with these people you will increasingly trust the beauty of your own voice adding harmonies of its own”.

I have loved reading their stories, reading their writings. There are too many to introduce. But some of my favourites among those who have left us their writings are our homegrown English mystics from the 14th century: Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton and Julian of Norwich.

In this season after All Souls and All Saints, where we remember those giants of faith who have gone before us, may we have that giant faith too, in our own time.

In this season of Vacancy, where we look to God in our vulnerability for His provision of a new Bishop of Blackburn, may we know that ‘great cloud of witnesses cheering us on’. (Hebrews 12.1-3)

And as the nights draw in and the weather worsens may we fix our eyes on Jesus, the Light of the World. May we run the race towards him, towards His assurance of Heaven, tasting some of that joy set before him, which the saints today enjoy.

I will leave the last word to Evelyn Underhill. She had the word “Eternity” embroidered on a plaque in the wall in her study. She was a woman whose gaze was drawn to the things of heaven, about which she writes with such beautiful texture ...

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“It’s true that we cannot conceive all it means and all it costs to stand in that world of purity and wonder from which the saints speak to us; those high solitudes where they taste the mountain rapture, the deeply hidden valleys with a vista of white splendour, torrents of living water. quiet upper pastures and tiny holy flowers.”

Rt Rev. Dr Jill Duff, Bishop of Lancaster