

## WHO ARE THESE?

Feast of All Saints

St Michael Cornhill

Sunday November 2<sup>nd</sup> 2014

Preached by The Rt Revd Dr Stephen Platten

Gordon Hopkins was a remarkable man in many ways – his continuing legacy is a book, *The Moving Staircase*. But Gordon was also a real eccentric. Let me recount just two incidents. First there was the visit of Mrs Wilde, a local luminary. She had come to open a big event, a garden fête, I think. Hopkin's house was fairly chaotic and Mrs Wilde wished to find a lavatory before appearing and opening the afternoon's proceedings. Gordon forgot to tell her that the old ancient cistern – one of those up in the air – leaked when the chain was pulled. I need to add that said lady was wearing a full brimmed and exotic hat.

She emerged to greet the first V.I.P. and as she shook his hand she bowed her head and the said gentleman was utterly soaked as the hat's brim decanted its contents upon him. Many other incidents involving Gordon are remembered. I've kept his role quiet until now, but you've probably guessed he was a parson, a parish priest. Indeed, he was the incumbent of St. Luke's, Pallion, at the heart of the Sunderland shipyards. One Saturday, on his day off, he had briefed his curate on a two o'clock wedding. What Gordon had omitted to tell the curate – or indeed I imagine what Gordon himself had not remembered – was that he had booked a funeral in concurrently to this wedding. So, as the bride stood at the church gate, a gleaming hearse was just arriving to park behind her and deliver its contents. I forget now how the curate dealt with it, but he found a way through with consummate skill.

Now I begin with Gordon since despite all this (and perhaps partially because of all this) he was seen by many to be something of a *saint!* He was a marvellous pastor and he worked tirelessly for the poor in Sunderland's toughest heart. So in the light of all this, was he a saint? For who or what precisely is a saint? Interestingly enough, that first and well known reading from the Apocalypse, the Revelation to John poses almost exactly that question:

'Who are these, clothed in white robes and from where do they come?'

The *immediate* answer in the Apocalypse is that these are they who came out of great tribulation. *Saints*, in this account, don't have an easy time of it.

Now, let me introduce you to two or three more relatively recent contenders for the role of saint. Richard Carr-Gomm was not far short of being born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Educated at Stowe School, he joined the fourth Battalion of the Coldstream Guards and prospered. With accelerated promotion he became a Major in his regiment, but when still a rising star, at the age of 33, he had a change of heart. He had, while being posted in Italy, visited the Cottolengo community in Turin. Here some 8,000 people were being cared for by nuns and their extended family.

What he saw there changed Carr-Gomm's life. He resigned his commission and went to live in a humble dwelling in Bermondsey. He scrubbed out houses and set up a house for lonely elderly people. This initiative expanded to more houses and the headquarters in Abbeyfield Road

gave the society its name – *Abbeyfield* of which organisation you will doubtless all know. After a row on the board, Richard was voted out and acted as a librarian for a short time, but within a couple of years he was to found the Carr-Gomm society for those with learning difficulties and who could not live alone.

Then, there was Brother Douglas, one of the two founders of the Anglican Franciscan Community, the Society of St. Francis. Let me allow David Scott, the poet and priest to describe Douglas, focusing on his beekeeping:

‘He would set off with three essentials:  
cat, garden fork, boater with veil,  
looking like something from the Army and Navy Stores  
by way of Lady Ottoline Morrell.  
The way to the bees was through central Italy,  
Dorset was Umbria; the burnt, with ilex trees,  
the other lush after it poured;  
one with ox and cart, the other with a worn out Ford.’

Douglas had an accomplice, a fellow founder of this Franciscan order, and he, one Father Algy Robertson was not much different. Algy always felt the cold. So, when celebrating Mass at St. Mary Mag’s in Oxford, he’d strap on a water bottle round his waist beneath his vestments. One day in the midst of Mass, it burst. Algy did not even notice – others were alarmed; they assumed incontinence was the cause of the great puddle around the monkish celebrant.

Now none of these people was *easy*, for their very eccentricity also brought with it a certain bloodmindedness. But each of them, in different ways helped change a weary and needy world. It was Douglas, Algy and others who drew the nation’s attention to wayfarers – men and women of the road. Hilfield Friary cared for all – however difficult, however care-worn, however unprepossessing they were! Abbeyfield we all know about, and possibly even the Carr-Gomm society. Gordon Hopkins touched the lives of the 1930s Jarrow marchers and many others. So are they *saints*? None of them has a special day in the Anglican calendar.

Yet, I am clear that these and countless others like them are what today, *All Saints Day* is about. It is about those who through their transparent faith have allowed the gospel of Jesus Christ to transform our world – sometimes dramatically, sometimes in smaller ways. *Who are these?* the writer of the Apocalypse asks. Jesus replies with the Beatitudes. *These* are those who are poor in spirit, who mourn, who hunger and thirst after righteousness, who are pure in heart, who are peacemakers, who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.’ That is who *these* are. For these are some of *all the saints*. That is who Jesus is describing in the Beatitudes. In a less fallen world it should describe every Christian soul. It is a challenge to every one of us.

Talking of John Fenton, another unlikely saint - theologian, priest, university teacher, and friend to so many – yet to others an *enfant terrible*, my friend and poet David Scott, whom I quoted earlier, writes:

‘The outer life is burnt or buried on a particular date,  
but faith flies away from there to become something  
suddenly other. No one I know has been so firm on that.’

That feels to me like a splendid epitaph not only for Fenton himself, but for those whom we celebrate on *All Saints*.

Amen

Readings:

Revelation 7. 9-end

1 John. 4. 1-3

Matthew. 5. 1-12