



All Saints Day, Year B – November 1, 2009

Theme

A Homily preached by the Rev'd Canon M. Ansley Tucker

There is a wonderful passage in Paul Scott's *The Jewel in the Crown*, in which Lady Chatterjee, who is a Hindu Indian, delivers herself of a scathing commentary on what she believes constitutes sainthood for an English Christian. What sets her off is the memory of the English mission-teacher, Miss Crane, and her reaction in 1942 when Gandhi began to preach sedition. Lady Chatterjee says,

"There was that typical silliness of a picture of Mr Gandhi that she took down or was said to have taken down because she decided the old boy was being naughty whereas of course he was simply being astute. The English have always revered saints but hated them to be shrewd. English people who thought Gandhi a saint were identifying themselves with the thousands or millions of Indians who said he *was*, but saintliness to an Indian means quite a different thing than it means to an Englishman. An English person automatically thinks of a saint as someone who is going to be martyred, a man whose logic isn't going to work in a final show-down with the severely practical world, a man in fact who is a saint *per se*. Apart from occasional temptations (for which they prescribe hair-shirts) they expect these saints of theirs to be so *un*-earthbound that they have one foot in heaven already. And of course by heaven they mean the opposite of earth. They divide the material from the spiritual with their usual passion for tidiness and for people being orderly and knowing their place ..."

I think Lady Chatterjee is on to something here. What she presents is a caricature, to be sure, but it is not without truth.

Think for a moment of how we tend to use a word like "saintly" in a sentence. Is it not true that the image which springs to mind is that of an awfully nice, but slightly naïve, whiteheaded vicar?

I have told you before that (for my sins) I was once a member of the "Calendar Committee" of the Canadian Church. One of our jobs was to make preliminary recommendations concerning any nomination for inclusion in the list of saints and other worthies at the front of your BAS. I testify to you that we had a decided aversion to people who hadn't been dead for very long. To people, that is, whose engagements with this world still loomed large enough in the collective imagination to provoke someone who knew the nominee to say, "Her?! Are you kidding?" And while some such incredulity may indeed have been prompted by a scandalised awareness of sin (for example, the womanizing of Martin Luther King, or the downright nastiness of Florence Nightingale), it is just as much a reaction to the very earthiness of the nominee, to the fact that this guy actually liked Twinkies, and was heard to burp at the Symphony. It may even be, as Lady Chatterjee suggests, that the nominee was much too *politically* practised, much too wise in the ways of this world, and willing to make use of that wisdom, to fit our somewhat sanitised view of sainthood. Consequently, the Canadian Church could see its way, barely, to commemorating Janani Luwum, the Anglican Archbishop of Uganda who was martyred under the regime of Idi Amin in 1977; but we thought the better of Oscar Romero, or Michael Ramsay. It is just so darned hard for us to imagine that anybody who travels in the same worldly circle we do could be a saint.

And yet, my friends, *that* is the point! It is the point not only of *this* celebration, but of the Christian gospel itself. One of the most fundamental themes

running through our proclamation is that of *Incarnation*. The Incarnation isn't just about Baby Jesus: it is about wedding the material with the spiritual, it is about ensuring that our piety is absolutely engaged with the created order, it is about believing that the kingdom is on earth as much as it is in heaven.

And this means that to be a Christian, to be a saint, is to live a robust, curious, shrewd, absorbed and connected life. Such a one is apt to make mistakes, and even to commit sin. That, after all, is the risk of getting involved. But it strikes me that this is a far more faithful picture of what constitutes a saint than the insipid, un-earthbound, illogical, awfully nice and equally naïve, whiteheaded vicar of our imagination. Which is to say that, in the end, it is more like Jesus.

Into whose very body we are grafted by baptism.