

Unconventional Saints

A Message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
October 30, 2022
by Rev. Dave Le Grand

“Saints” – there are a range of uses we see for this word. Three meanings of “saint”, at least, offered by the Christian tradition: 1) festival to remember those who were martyred in times of persecution, so their names wouldn't be forgotten; 2) those who are made holy by God's grace and baptism, those with us (Paul referred even to those he was frustrated by as “saints”); and 3) those who are downtrodden, marginalized, who are “blessed” as Jesus lifts up in his *Beatitudes* that we heard in the Gospel reading today.

A final meaning of “saint” I listed there, emphasizes that a saint is not only one who is made holy, but also one who is blessed by God. It is this final context that frames the gospel reading today. Luke's version of Jesus' Beatitudes underscores the peculiar, even radical understanding of blessing that animates the Christian tradition. Blessing, according to Jesus, far from being about material abundance, is to enjoy the regard and favour of God. And the God whom Jesus bears witness shows a special regard for the poor, the maligned, the downtrodden.¹

Saint Drogo, the character you see portrayed on screen, is popularly considered the patron saint of my favourite beverage, coffee. Born in 1105, Drogo came along centuries before coffee was invented. That raises an interesting question: How did he become the saint of coffee?

Of the little historical record we have of Drogo, we know that he was born into a well-to-do family, but that his father died before his birth and his mother died in childbirth. Orphaned, raised by relatives, he, like all children of the 12th Century, was trained to be an adult at the innocent age of 12 – he was put out in a field as a shepherd, a job, solitary as it can be, which he apparently enjoyed.

When he was told how his mother died, he was devastated. He turned to God and a very prayerful, ascetic life – that is, he fasted, and believed that he needed to suffer to understand God's love. As implied by his title as “saint”, a miracle was attributed to him – people of his time reporting to have seen him tending to his flocks AND being present during Holy Mass, at the same time. *Bilocation*, as this it is called, was quite a prevalent miraculous ability of medieval saints.

By one report I found, Saint Drago the patron saint of:

Cattle, Sheep, and Shepherds, unattractive people and those whom others find repulsive, gallstones, kidney stones, hernias, and ruptures, French towns, orphans, midwives, and pregnant women, sick people, deafness and muteness, mental illness, and, coffeehouse keepers.²

¹ David Lose, “Dear Working Preacher”, October 31, 2003. <https://www.workingpreacher.org>

² This is a rather witty and short summary of St. Drago's life and legend: <https://procaffeination.com/why-is-saint-drogo-of-sebourg-the-patron-saint-of-coffee/>

I have to say that my first encounter with saints was hearing Roman Catholics in my life make reference to patron saints. I read of relics, the remains of the saints or items claimed to have been used by the saints, venerated in Cathedrals – miraculous healings credited to those relics and the saint themselves. That is not the full meaning of Saint. We should note that in the letters of Paul himself, though he might speak ill of another leader in the Jesus movement, he still most often referred to them as “saints”.

We are talking not just people of extraordinary character or reputed to perform sensational miracles, but our Christian tradition celebrates the saints who get little credit. All Saints Day, November 1st in the Christian tradition, is intended to celebrate the unsung hero saints, including the cloud of saints around us – those who have found their glory in death, but also those alive and making a difference. We will celebrate some special saints, gone before us and still with us, alike, in a few minutes. We don't do this very often. Not often enough.

I think about my grandfather who was always so patient with me as a child and who died in 1989. I have referred before to the saints of past churches, including my childhood church, which graced me with their stories and wisdom and who ask about me when talking to my parents. Who are saints in your life? Not the sensational ones who perform miracles, but who are the more ordinary saints, made holy as refract God's love for you.³

I have to say that some of the saints in my life are among the edgier people in my life. The ones who challenged me to see beyond my careful and polite life and upbringing. The people who taught me about making big mistakes and who were incarcerated for it, sometimes facing long sentences. I met a number of them in the chapel in federal penitentiaries, probably shunned by other inmates as do-gooders, but they seek a new spiritual path by doing jobs around the spiritual care centre, formerly called the chapel, and growing in their particular faith.

One saint I'd like to end this by mentioning a dear friend, David. He was a Roman Catholic priest and chaplain in federal prisons, as well as the chaplain to the motherhouse in Kingston when I was working in prisons. He had a mischievous sense of humour and was shockingly honest and intuitive when he was listening to a person. He was, I think, a thorn in the side of the institutional church, but he was a blessing to the faithful who felt that they were on the margins of church and happy to be there.

Those “Blessed are” statements of Jesus in his sermon read today celebrate that people who feel forgotten, the people who try so earnestly but feel like just as they get a step forward, they are pushed back three steps. We celebrate the gentle souls who nurtured us in our lives, the faithful who offered visible leadership or quiet service to their church community.

³ I (Dave) have come to see the metaphor of “refracting” God's image for one another as a helpful metaphor. Refraction is the “bending” of light, so we are unique refractions of God's love. For more on Refraction: <https://www.britannica.com/science/refraction>

I am reminded, though, that Jesus spent proportionally more of his time – as portrayed in the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark & Luke) – with the people who would not care much about synagogue etiquette, the outliers and people shunned or ignored by the community. I imagine protective parents hustling their children quickly past these saints of the fringes, those who struggled alone with mental illness, evidenced by their strange behaviours and unfiltered language.

God's saints are everywhere. That is celebrated by Christian tradition as a whole. Saints are not made holy by a church or any human process, but instead made holy by God's Grace. Saints can be especially those, who are struggling, afraid, feel alone, are chronically ill, tired of burden, and yes, those in need of a good strong cup of coffee. We are among that number – we can be saints too. Amen.