

All Saints 2019

'Tripping into the rough hands of God' May my words be faithful to the written word...

Blessed Are The Merciful by Tania Runyan

Written in response to the Amish schoolhouse shooting in Nickel Mines, USA

I didn't trust their forgiveness.

Before the blood cooled on the schoolhouse floor
they held the killer's widow in their arms,

raised money for his children,
lined his grave site with a row of patient horses.

Somewhere in town there had to be a father
splitting a trunk and imagining the crush

of the murderer's skull. There had to be a mother
hurling a Bible at the wall that received her prayers.

Or is it just the flash and noise of my own life
that primes me for anger? Does scrolling

through playlists in traffic fill the spaces
in my mind reserved for grace?

Forgiveness requires imagination.

Eye for an eye is efficient.

For the man brought chains.

He brought wires, eyehooks and boards.

He brought a bag of candles and lubricant
and secured little girls with plastic ties.

Two sisters begged to be shot first
to spare the others.

He shot them first. Then the rest.
One child with twenty-four bullets.

Perhaps they know something I don't,
something to do with the morning rising

over an open field. The fathers receive
the meadowlark, the swallowtail,

the good corn rising into the fog.

The mothers ride their carriages into town,

accepting the rumbles of the stony road,
tripping into the rough hands of God.

Powerful writing about the reminder for each of us to find God in the mess, pain and trauma of life. And of our call to be a community of mercy and kindness.

Today's Feast of All Saints speaks powerfully into this place. Saints are those who are remembered for their particular resonance in showing something of God to the rest of us. They don't stand between us and God, instead they stand alongside us. Rather like the crowds of South African's cheering on their national team yesterday. Willing us to discover like Paul in 1 Cor 1 we are called not because of our qualities, but because we know our need of God.

The Saints of God invite us to avoid the kind of self-deceit that Jesus attacks whereby people assume that 'we' are on the right side with God and the 'others' are not. Everything we earn and achieve will get us nowhere, as we meet God face to face, and all we will have to trust is the reality of God, wearing the face of Jesus, and waiting to wash our feet.

The beatitudes - or beautiful attitudes - are given today as our Gospel portion, to remind us what we are called to be. There's been a big debate in church history about whether the beatitudes are seen in this life, or are pointing us to what the Church will become in the fulness of time. The beatitudes are words given for how disciples should live collectively (the text is not an individualistic one). But rather than simply saying this is what

Jesus demands for the Community of Christ, it is at the same time God's will for the whole world. In the history of the Church there have been times when the beatitudes were seen as fodder for a sect mentality - thought to only pertain to a few 'chosen' ones, whether clerical or monastic. Thomas Aquinas was central to the challenge to this, seeing them as for every Christian everywhere, at all times.

There can be said to be two groups 1-4 and 5-8 which can be said to be the first group those concerned with attitude and the second group those concerned with activities. Or alternatively those in need and those who act.

However you see the Beatitudes, they stand as a reflection of Jesus' whole life - as Origen reminds us - for in Jesus we see in his kindness, in his weeping over Jerusalem, in his transformation of peoples' lives, in his reconciling love - a fulfilment of them all. Just as the opening poem reminds us of.

And Saints are so important because they are ordinary people who manage to do extraordinary things. They are architypical instances of God's transforming power. Peter Brown in his book *The Cult of Saints* argues that the history of the early Church is to be read through the development of 'popular' practices and beliefs associated with the cult of martyrs and later other Saints. We ignore the saints at our peril.

This argument is taken up by Ramsey MacMullen in his 2009 study *The Second Church* which argues that the Christian population in ancient urban centres had perhaps 5 per cent of the population participating in regular official worship, while the other 95 per cent constituted the *second church* whose Christian identity was shaped and formed by the cult of martyrs and saints in cemeteries and tombs.

The Feast of all Saints recalls each one of us to the reality that we have to give peaceful attention to the thread of God's story, living in God's rhythms and savouring God's attention as we build God's Kingdom and grow the Church. It doesn't happen by accident, but rather by attention. Though fortunately as the Jesuit Henri de Lubac would say, "God is never absent from his work: he did not create and leave:'

As Tanya Runyan in her opening poem Blessed are the Merciful shows us, we can have a distrust of those who show mercy. We know that an 'Eye for an eye is efficient.' But 'Forgiveness requires imagination.'

How can the God of the beatitudes - the fountain of all sanctity, and therefore of the Saints - transform our lives so that we can come to see for ourselves:

Perhaps they know something I don't,
something to do with the morning rising
over an open field. The fathers receive
the meadowlark, the swallowtail,
the good corn rising into the fog.
The mothers ride their carriages into town,
accepting the rumbles of the stony road,
tripping into the rough hands of God.

We need to allow ourselves to be inspired by the Spirit of the beatitude God as we accept the 'rumbling of the stony road' and 'trip into the rough hands of God.'

May you be wrapped up in God's love. Found deep in God's everlasting wings. Carried and kept, safe and cherished. Inspired by the Saints may the merciful power of Christ breathe across your being now and for evermore. Amen.