



## The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

### Homily for All Saints (1<sup>st</sup> November) 2024

When an individual is raised to the Altars - that is, made a saint - the Pope sits surrounded by the panoply of the Roman Church and makes an infallible declaration - much like the Vicar issuing rulings and opinions at PCC meetings - stating it to be the conviction of the Church after intense inquiry that this person has entered Heaven and is worthy of veneration.

Yet, for all the talk of the celestial realms, sanctity is much more about the earthly lives of the saints than their heavenly reward. Whilst it is true that the process of canonisation requires proof of two miracles wrought by proposed saints - or more accurately at their intercession, furnishing evidence of the divine favour in which they are held - knowledge of those works is only sought, because there was a quality to their earthly lives, which led people to consider them saintly in one way or another.

Saints are popularly imagined to have been mild-mannered, gentle people - often somewhat naïfs. We sometimes say of someone that she or he could try the patience of a saint; but in some instances that would not have taken very much. What constitutes saintliness varies considerably from case to case; and it is also somewhat subject to fashion.

Of course, terming the influence as fashion is a slightly disparaging approach. Certainly, there are some amongst the hagiographical catalogue, whose place in the calendar is curious to us; but at the same time, we need to recognise that a particular context will shine a light on a life, revealing qualities about it, which are not apparent in different eras - or, perhaps just as likely, not sufficiently esteemed to attract widespread recognition. To a large extent, the commemoration of saints is in a constant state of flux with individuals falling in and out of the routines of ecclesiastical life.

We can see this as an aspect of the incarnational character of discipleship, which we might define as tying down and applying the conceptual principles of our Faith to the concrete circumstances of the moment.

Equally, the root of this incarnational philosophy is *the* Incarnation when the infinite and eternal God broke into time through the coming of Christ into the world; and this, too, provides us with an understanding of the significance of sanctity.

In the holiness of individuals' lives - however it is configured - the Source of that holiness - God Himself - is seen to be at work in the world: the Incarnation of that first Christmas Day continues through aspects of the continuing work of the Body of Christ in the world; and sometimes, so intense is the focus on the actions of a particular individual that we identify in her or him a concentration of holiness.

The significance of sanctity for the Church, therefore, does not lie so much in the ascent of the individual into Heaven, but in the evidence of Heaven breaking into time and earthly history through the agency of particular people. Our veneration, therefore, is not primarily of them but of the evidential instances of God being at work in the world, which they embodied. They are akin the chalices holding the Blood of Christ. When the chalice is elevated, it is not the vessel itself which we honour with our genuflections, but what it contains. So it is for the saints.