

TEXT: Matthew 5:1-12  
THEME: Saints illumine the dark  
SUBJECT: Saints  
TITLE: Luminaries

All Saints' Day  
01 November 2020  
Messiah Moravian  
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Rowan Williams defines saints as people who are, in various ways, beacons of illumination: people who lived lives that open up perspectives and horizons for the rest of us that are unpredictable and enriching. Some of them you may have wanted to invite to dinner, others perhaps not. They are not necessarily straightforwardly good and attractive folk, but they are people who let a little light through, even in lives that are sometimes flawed and compromised.

Sharing their stories helps us make sense of the world and of God. The world is more than you ever thought, you are more than you ever thought, God is more than you could begin to think, and you are not trapped in the story you tell yourself about yourself. The vision of life revealed in the lives of the saints opens our eyes to the “more” we long to see and be.

St Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) constantly found herself pushing against the assumptions of an exceptionally closed society. To sixteenth-century churchmen, women were naturally less intellectual than men, and therefore needed to have their minds carefully occupied in times of prayer as they were less self-controlled than men.

On September 27, 1970, Pope Paul VI proclaimed Teresa a Doctor of the Church. During the ceremony the Pope spoke of her as a teacher of “marvelous profundity.” Her common sense, humor, and penchant for every day images liven her writings; but she is above all remarkable for her analytical abilities in probing the mysteries of God’s workings in the soul.

Friendship is, for Teresa, a basic quality of Christian life. When she was 21 she entered a community in which class distinction was enshrined, where powerful personalities formed cliques and were courted for favors by the less privileged. Increasingly her unease with the implications of this atmosphere and her growing awareness of the demands of “friendship” with Christ pushed her in the direction of a new style of community life, one in which equality was fundamental.

Everything could and should be on terms of friendship; all shared in the manual work of the house; all were valued independently of their background and status. There can be no excuse for defending any kind of human status or family pride or racial exclusion. Teresa was not a social campaigner or a politician, but what she offered was simply another model of life together, grounded in God’s welcome and the daily attempt to keep our hearts open to God and one another.

Teresa came from a Jewish family at a time when people of Jewish blood were subject to systematic hostility and discrimination in Spain. The Spanish Inquisition was, in fact, created primarily to deal with the supposed problem of converted Jews secretly reverting to their ancestral religion. Her country, the greatest power on earth at the time, was fearful, bitter and prejudiced. Sound familiar? Can we, like her, see through the anxieties of the social world to a shared human kinship?

From a well-known luminary to a lesser known but no less significant one: Sergei Bulgakov. David Bentley Hart calls Bulgakov the greatest theologian of the 20th century. Sergei grew up in the late 19th century in a priest's family in rural Russia. He didn't find anything in the religion of his childhood that held his interest and allegiance, and in his teenage years his faith disappeared.

He became a radical, a Marxist, and made such a success of his career as an economist that, in the last decade of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, many people regarded him as the great rising hope of intellectual Marxism in Russia. Lenin thought of the young Bulgakov with respect as one of the great theorists of the Marxist future.

It is not completely clear what made the difference, but around 1903 the young Dr Bulgakov, fresh from the publication of a massive work on the application of Marxist theory to agriculture, decided that Marxism wasn't quite enough. He began to read novelists, including Dostoevsky, philosophers and of all things, English biblical scholarship. Slowly, he found his way back to Christian faith.

He wrote some new books and was removed from his post at the University of Moscow. He offered himself for ordination in 1917. After the Revolution, he was exiled and spent the rest of his life in Paris, where he was the founder and first principal of a very famous Russian theological college in Paris—St Serge. He died in 1944.

In the 1980's, his essays that exposed the fatal structural weaknesses in the Marxist approach to humanity, were secretly reprinted and passed from hand to hand in the Soviet Union. They were read, rightly, as prophetic of the collapse of the Soviet system.

Bulgakov saw politics, art and liturgy as three ways in which human beings transform the world: *politics*, which seeks to transform the relationships between people and between social groups; *art*, which seeks to transform the material stuff of the world; and *liturgy*, in which human beings invite God to transform the entire environment in which they live—inner and outer.

Here is where the story gets interesting: Bulgakov believed each one—politics, art, liturgy—dries and withers without the others. A politics that is only politics ends up in managerial tyranny or worse. Art for art's sake leaves you with a lot of highly cultivated

dilettantes who never really make a difference to anything. Liturgy without politics and art isolates the vital presence of the body of Christ in the midst of the world from the real concerns of human beings.

Bring them all together and you understand what the Church is: the community of the new creation, the new reality in which the political, the creative and the devotional/spiritual are absolutely fused together so that there is something utterly new. To be clear, he is not arguing for a theocracy, but for the church to be fully engaged in transforming the world.

In his last years he had an enormous reputation as a spiritual director. Some of the people he guided in the life of faith who visited him on his deathbed, spoke about the light that they saw in his face—more than reflected light, they all said. In the last few weeks after a stroke that left him incapable of speaking, people would go into his darkened room and find there was light emanating from his face.

Bulgakov himself would have said, as would many Orthodox theologians, that one of the things that the saints do is (literally and metaphorically) “shed light.” In their lives and work they make sense of the world by challenging assumptions that have become prisons human beings shut themselves into. They make sense of life by seeking a way of discipleship where the wholeness of new creation can come alive.

On this day, All Saints’ Day, remember and give thanks for the saints in your life, for those who have shed light enough for you to see that the world is more than you ever thought, that you are more than you ever thought, that God is more than you can begin to think, and that you are not trapped in the story you tell yourself about yourself.

(The stories of St Teresa and Sergei Bulgakov are taken primarily from Rowan Williams’ *Luminaries: Twenty Lives that Illuminate the Christian Way*.)

PRAYER: written by Teresa of Avila

Lord, You know better than I myself  
that I am growing older and will someday be old.  
Keep me from the fatal habit of thinking  
I must say something on every subject and on every occasion.

Release me from craving to  
straighten out everybody's affairs.  
Make me thoughtful but not moody;  
helpful but not bossy.

With my vast store of wisdom,  
it seems a pity not to use it all;  
but You know, Lord,  
that I want a few friends at the end.  
Keep my mind free from the recital of endless details;  
give me wings to get to the point.

Seal my lips on my aches and pains;  
they are increasing, and love of rehearsing them  
is becoming sweeter as the years go by.

I dare not ask for improved memory,  
but for a growing humility and a lessening cock-sureness  
when my memory seems to clash with the memories of others.  
Teach me the glorious lesson that occasionally I may be mistaken.

Keep me reasonably sweet, for a sour old person  
is one of the crowning works of the devil.  
Give me the ability to see good things in unexpected places  
and talents in unexpected people;  
and give, O Lord, the grace to tell them so. Amen.