

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for All Saints Day  
Sunday October 31st 2021

Do you want to be a saint? That's a strange question, and I suppose that most of us would recoil and say 'Hang on, me? No way?' But let's spend a few minutes thinking about this.

One day the young Thomas Merton was walking down Fifth Avenue with his friend Robert Lax, and Lax said to him 'What do you want to be anyway?' Merton replied 'I guess I want to be a good Catholic'. So Lax said 'What you should say is that you want to be a saint'. 'How do you expect me to be a saint', Merton asks, and Lax replies 'By wanting to. All that is necessary to be a saint is to want to be one. All you have to do is desire it.' That conversation was what kickstarted Merton into diving deeper and deeper into the mystery of God, the mystery of human existence. So was Lax right, is desiring it all you need to become a saint?

Perhaps we need to think a little about our image of what a saint is. Our mental image of the saints tends to be based on the visual images we have of them. So, while we know, of course, some details of their lives, to some extent they are forever frozen in our minds in the postures of the statues that we know. St Anthony is forever holding a book, St Francis is forever speaking to birds or looking at a crucifix, St Joseph is never without his lily, St Philip Howard is inseparable from his dog, and so on; and, of course, not only are they largely frozen and immobile, but they are also almost exclusively in church. While we know that they were ordinary people living complicated and often messy lives, in our minds they are to some extent trapped in the church building and frozen into immobility. So, when I say 'Do you want to be a saint?' the instant reaction is 'No thanks'. Do you want someone to make a statue of you, or a stained glass window, and put it in the church? No way! But that, of course, was not what Robert Lax was suggesting to Merton, and Merton understood that. Both of them would have known that being a saint is something very different. They would have known that the Gospel we have just heard provides a sort of blueprint for sanctity. We always struggle with the beatitudes because of the trouble we have translating what Jesus said into English, as neither 'Blessed' nor 'Happy' really does it. What he is saying is something much more complex than that. 'You are truly fortunate, moving confidently and without distraction towards God and towards truth if...' Might give us an idea of what it means. So, you are fortunate, on the move, travelling deeper into God and into reality, confidently and without distraction, if you are a peacemaker, for example. To be a peacemaker means to be moving joyfully and purposefully towards God and a renewed way of living: and that, of course, is also the pathway to becoming a saint.

A saint is a person who has looked over the shaken up jigsaw pieces of life, and seen the pattern so that they can begin to put them into order, patiently and without distraction. They have seen that all the limitations on human life that can be so frustrating – the weakness that leads us into sin and needs mercy; the divided and rebellious heart that

needs purifying; the injustice that needs rebalancing; the anger that needs calming, and all the other human limitations set out in the beatitudes, all of these they have seen and they see that there is in them a chance for growth, a chance to embrace the challenge, not be frustrated by it. A saint is someone who knows that this moment, now, today, they ride the crest of a wave, caught for an instant between what they have been in the past and what they might become in the future, and they are resolved to throw themselves forward, not fall back. A saint is a person who is free, because they know that the things that matter most, their own integrity and their closeness to God, cannot be taken from them; a saint is a person who is content because they know that although they cannot change everything they can always change something, they can change themselves, and so there is always something to be done and there is a certain tranquillity of mind in that.

So, was Lax right that all you need to do to be a saint is to desire it? Well, it depends on what you mean by desire. Like many English people, I would like to be able to speak a foreign language really well, Spanish lets say. In a sense I desire to be able to speak Spanish. But what I really mean by that is, I really want to be able to speak Spanish but I want it to happen overnight, without any effort on my part. I would like it to be sort of infused into me while I sleep. In a sense I desire to speak Spanish, but really it is a desire divorced from reality. So, is desiring it enough to become a saint? Well, not if it is the same sort of desiring, divorced from real commitment. If I am passionate about learning Spanish, I will get there. If I am passionate about becoming a saint, if that is what I really want, I will get there, too. If the desire is based on a passionate longing, we will get there, and Lax is right.

A saint is someone who is free; a saint is someone who has a deep-seated contentment; a saint is someone who sees clearly, and knows what matters most in life; a saint is someone moving gently but steadfastly forwards, not frustrated by the slow progress or the apparent lake of change; a saint is someone who knows God, and knows themselves; a saint is someone who knows that, in spite of the challenges and frustrations of life, at a fundamental level all is well. So, now do you want to be a saint? I hope so. I hope that together we can work towards the Bishops vision for our Diocese, where our parishes truly become 'communities of saints'. What joy there would be in Heaven then.