

Sunday School Notes: 4 November 2018: What kind of people make up the church?

This last week two things were celebrated around the world: Halloween and All Saints Day. Halloween is just an American celebration of an old idea – and really has nothing much to do with Christians. But All Saint's Day was set aside by the church so that we would stop and remember and give thanks for those who have died believing in Jesus.

But who are the 'saints'? The dictionary tells us that there is a casual meaning of the word 'saint' to describe someone who is very good. So your mother might describe you as a 'saint' if you behave well under difficult circumstances. However, the word is also used to refer to people who deserve a halo because they are extra-specially good and holy. Therefore the disciples are often referred to as 'Saint Peter' or Saint Paul, etc. You may have even heard people talk about other saints - St Francis, for example. He was a wealthy young business man who lived about 600 years ago, but he discovered that money didn't make him happy. When he became a Christian he gave away all his money and lived a very simple life preaching about God. He cared deeply about God's creation and so has become known as the patron saint of animals.

But the word translated 'saint' in the Bible refers to all Christians, just as we saw all Christians called to be "living stones". Now this doesn't mean that when you come to know Jesus you get a halo! But a number of verses (e.g. Romans 1:7, 1 Cor 1:2) make it clear that all Christians are to be God's 'holy people' which in other versions is translated as 'saints'. So you are a "saint" if you are a member of God's family and living in his ways!

When we talked about 'living stones', we emphasised the fact that Christians make up the church and that they are there to support one another. Today's description of us as 'saints' adds to this picture of what the church should be like.

The word 'saint' reminds us that Christians are expected to be holy – with or without a halo! So the church (the people of God) is meant to be full of holy people. Now 'holy' is quite a difficult word to understand. It comes from old words meaning 'cut off' or 'separated'. What it suggests is that God's people are different from other people because they have dedicated themselves to God. In the Old Testament God painted pictures of this difference. For example the tabernacle or tent of worship used in the wilderness had to be made 'differently' according to God's rules – it wasn't like any other place of worship; the priests were treated differently – they didn't get given land to farm but lived at the temple so they could pray to God for others; God gave his ten commandments so his people would be different from the other nations round about.

When Jesus came to live on earth, the disciples learnt that being different meant being completely different. Often people had just obeyed God's rules to keep on his good side, but Jesus taught them (and us) that we should be living according to God's ways out of love for him and because he loves us and all people.

But this didn't mean that those who want to follow God had first to make sure they were perfect. Lots of them were definitely not! Let's have a look at some of the people who could therefore be described as 'saints':

1. A runaway slave called Onesimus! (Philemon v 10) Slaves were the lowest class of people in the Roman Empire. People didn't care much about them – they bought them and sold them and made them work hard all their lives. All we know about this slave, Onesimus, is that he belonged to Philemon. We don't know how he was caught or sold, where he used to live, what colour he was, or anything about him. We think he was lazy because his name means 'useful' and Paul plays on the word saying that once he was 'useless' but that he has become 'useful' (Philemon v 11)! We don't know how he ran away – maybe he crept away at night; maybe he even stole some money so he could escape. He aimed for Rome because he probably thought that he could be unnoticed in the city (many slaves did that). While in Rome he met Paul and learnt about Jesus and became a 'saint'. Paul sent him back to his master, offering to pay his debts and hoping that his master would free him but that was not guaranteed. But no matter how bad or useless he had been, Jesus accepted him into the family.
2. A doctor – Luke (Col 4:14) there are several reasons why we think it possible that he was a freed slave – only slaves abbreviated names (Lucius to Luke); often medicine was practised by slaves. But Luke was an educated man and he wrote the books of Acts and Luke – and he was a member of the "saint family" too.
3. A Minister of Finance! (Acts 8:26-39) Do you remember the story we had of Philip who was sent into the desert to preach to a man who was reading as he was being driven in his carriage? He wasn't able to understand what he was reading so Philip explained some of it to him. This man became the first 'saint' from Africa. We don't even know his name, but we do know that he went on his way back to Africa 'rejoicing', so he joined Jesus' family, even though he didn't have all the knowledge he perhaps really needed.
4. A wealthy business woman named Lydia (Acts 16:14) – she was a merchant/ a seller of purple cloth. This was the most expensive material anyone could buy as it was used by kings and nobles. She must have been quite a tough cookie to compete in a male-dominated world but she was so thrilled to become a "saint" that she invited Paul and Timothy to stay in her big house as they preached in the city of Philippi. Then her home became a meeting place for the church.
5. A jailer (Acts 16: 25-34) He became a saint when Paul and Silas and the other prisoners didn't escape from his prison during an earthquake. He was so upset he was thinking of suicide because he knew that, if even one prisoner escaped, he would be punished severely. He was surprised to find no-one had gone and came to know Jesus that night. Then he looked after Paul and Silas, though before he had just thrown them in prison without caring for their needs at all.
6. A chief in the army – Cornelius – Acts 10. We know he was a good man, but to have got promotion he must have proved himself to be tough in battle.
7. Fishermen – Peter, James, John and Andrew – they weren't posh at all. See how they are described in Acts 4:13 – "ordinary, uneducated men" Yet they were part of God's family.

8. Rom 16 – masses of names! Most of them we have hardly ever heard of – they were nonentities; yet they were clearly all “saints” or members of God’s family.

These are just a few of the stories about Jesus’ family of “saints”. We see that it consists of

- People from all sorts of backgrounds;
- People who did bad things before they came to love Jesus - like a runaway slave or like Paul who hunted down Jesus-followers and sent them off to prison or like Peter who betrayed Jesus;
- People of different races and people groups;
- Men and women.

Everyone who loves Jesus so much that he/she who tries to follow Jesus’ example is a “saint”. So we have a lot of saints at DMC – even in the Sunday School. Even when we make bad decisions and let Jesus down at times, he looks at our hearts and knows his “saints”. Are you one of them? If you want to be, you can be.