



SERMONS THAT WORK

All Saints' Day
Year C

Dead Sinners, Revised and Edited
[RCL]: Daniel 7:1-3,15-18; Psalm 149; Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 6:20-31

How do you define a saint? Would you know a real-life saint if you met one?

Try this definition: “A saint is a dead sinner, revised and edited.” This comes from the early 20th-century satirist Ambrose Bierce in his 1906 work, *The Cynic's Word Book*, where he defined saints as revised and edited sinners presumably because if we knew the truth of the saint's life, we would find a truth more complicated and less holy than the legend.

On this All Saints' Day, as we sing a song of the saints of God, patient and brave and true, we recall that while one was a soldier, and one was a priest, and one was slain by a fierce wild beast, we also sing that “there's not any reason, no, not the least, why I shouldn't be one too.”

Isn't becoming a saint a stretch for any of us? How can we live up to the greats like Peter and Paul? Together with the first Christ-followers, they gave their lives as martyrs to spread the Good News across the Roman Empire. Even just this week in the Lesser Feasts and Fasts of our church, we remembered James Hannington and his companions. The Church of England consecrated the native of Sussex as Bishop of Eastern Equatorial Africa, sending him and others to build up the church. Soldiers of King Mwanga captured the group while they were forging a highland route from Mombasa in Kenya to Buganda on the shores of Lake Victoria. A week later, on October 29, 1885, King Mwanga ordered their executions. They died trying to share the love of God on the shores of Lake Victoria. Even while lamenting our colonial legacy and all the pain and suffering it brought to the countries on the African continent, we can admire the faith of those who sought to serve Jesus knowing it could cost their lives.

In our Gospel reading from Luke, after a series of blessings and woes, Jesus says, “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt” (Luke 6:27-29, NRSV).

We see this faith lived out in James Hannington and his companions. Just before he was put to death, Hannington said, “Go, tell Mwanga I have purchased the road to Uganda with my blood.” His

steadfastness impressed many of those who witnessed his death. The persecution was just beginning. Mwanga had twenty-three Anglican and twenty-two Catholic converts to Christianity tortured and executed in a two-year period as he was reacting against European incursion into Africa. These were African-born believers whose faith even to death transformed what is now Uganda. Those African believers showed true love for those who were torturing and killing them and so planted the seeds for a strong Anglican church long under indigenous ministry. Even Mwanga, who was exiled in 1899, would be baptized into the Anglican Church in the Seychelles, dying a Christian in 1903 at the age of 35.

The Episcopal Church requires of its saints evidence of heroic faith, love, goodness of life, service to others for Christ's sake, and devotion. We certainly see these markers in Hannington's life. Yet, we also see that Ambrose Bierce has a point. To see the bishop as a saint, we have to squint at the ways he and his companions, with the aid of the Church Missionary Society using the martyrs to win public support, led to Buganda becoming a British protectorate. They longed to share the Good News of God's love and grace and in so doing brought the yoke of colonialism with what was to be freedom and new life in Christ. Even their capture and deaths were not without complication; evidence is clear that Hannington had been warned of the political danger in forging a highland route to Kenya. Mwanga wanted to push back against European incursion into his kingdom. He might have wanted to serve Jesus, but James Hannington's death certainly benefitted English expansion.

When we look for saints, we find that their lives are complicated. Hailed in her lifetime as a living saint, some were troubled to learn that Mother Teresa of Calcutta had told her spiritual director that she spent most of the years of her ministry in deep doubt, including about the existence of God. This was discovered through sixty-six years of correspondence between Mother Teresa and her spiritual confidants which came to light after her death. The publication of the correspondence was not intended to mar her international reputation; those seeking her sainthood wanted to present the nun as she really was, serious doubts and all.

In accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, Teresa proclaimed to the world that she accepted the award in the name of the poor: "And through this award and through all of us gathered here together, we are wanting to proclaim the good news to the poor that God loves them, that we love them, that they are somebody to us, that they too have been created by the same loving hand of God, to love and to be loved." This was very much like Jesus. Yet months earlier, she wrote a confidant, "Jesus has a very special love for you, as for me, the silence and emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear." To accept Mother Teresa as a saint is to take her doubts and all as one who loved the poor as Jesus taught, even when she didn't feel God's presence.

This is perhaps why the snarky definition offered by Ambrose Bierce proves oddly accurate and soundly scriptural. Bierce defined a saint as "A dead sinner, revised and edited." We find the same in scripture and our own lives. All of us are sinners. Not one of us is pure. Though we never knew him, we can know that James Hannington was a sinner. The same holds for Mother Teresa, though her doubts were not sin. We just know that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. What makes someone a saint is not that they are holy, but that God is holy. Every one of us in baptism is buried with Christ in his death to rise

with him in resurrection. We are all called to be dead to sin and alive to God. We are all called to be saints—dead sinners revised and edited by the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus.

Dead sinners that we are, we too find our own unique vocation as James Hannington and Mother Teresa did. We are to serve Christ by serving others, loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves. We are to go out from our worship so nurtured by the presence of our Lord in Word and Sacrament that this community is changed, even in a small way, and the world with it. We don't do any of these actions in order to earn or deserve God's grace and love, which have already been given to us freely. Instead, we love our neighbors as ourselves in response to that love, expecting nothing in return as God has given us everything.

There are many other dead sinners who need to know that God loves them as they are, but would like to work on revising and editing. That work of redemption will continue until that day when we join James and Teresa and all the saints as the Lord God wipes away the tears from all faces and we cry, "Holy, Holy, Holy."

We don't define saints. God does. And the Holy Trinity wishes that all would gather around the heavenly throne in that saintly chorus, even you and me.

The Rev. Canon Frank Logue is Canon to the Ordinary of the Diocese of Georgia and a member of the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church. Frank blogs on church development topics at loosecanon.georgiaepiscopal.org.