

I don't think it ever reached these shores but back in England one of my favourite television programmes was called "Local Heroes". The presenter, Alan Hart-Davies, was filmed clad in a purple and yellow cagoule and riding a similarly coloured bicycle, touring round Britain, telling stories about the lives of those people who, through their invention and dedication fashioned the world in which we live. He would relate stories about people such as Francis Bacon who was the first man to realise that frozen food stayed fresh (and who died from the pneumonia he contracted whilst stuffing a chicken with snow to preserve it), or the Geordie, Joseph Swan, who invented the light bulb only for Thomas Edison to secure the patent rights and claim himself as inventor. These stories have been recorded and passed down through the years to such an extent that they make good television today. Far less is known, it seems, of the lives of the Saints who equally colour our everyday lives.

Now, some will already be thinking that the saints don't affect us greatly other than the local church or school may be named after one. However, they do crop up far more frequently than we at first realise. How many people carry a St. Christopher medal, I wonder? Alternatively we encounter towns or villages named after a particular saint. In England we have St. Albans for example or even St. Helens (home of a famous rugby league team). Yesterday, England celebrated the four hundred and eleventh anniversary of an attempt by a group of men to blow up the Houses of Parliament. Guy Fawkes, Yorkshireman and Roman Catholic, is remembered by the lighting of fireworks, one of which is called the Catherine Wheel. This is named in honour of St. Catherine, who for her religious beliefs was tortured by being tied to a spiked wheel.

So saints do impact on our lives, but we know very little about them or even what we mean by the word "saint". The dictionary defines a saint as someone recognised by the church as being exceptionally holy, or devoted to God. So why do we have this special reverence for them, a reverence that some have claimed borders on the very edge of worship?

We don't worship the saints, let's make that abundantly clear from the outset. God, and God alone is the only being that is worthy of our worship. All others fall far short of worship. St. Paul was quick to stop the inhabitants of the town of Lystra from worshipping him and Barnabas after he had cured a lame man. The Lystrans thought that he was a god and started to worship him, but he rebuked them saying "Why are you doing this? We ourselves are only human beings like you!" No the saints are not there for us to worship.

In the Middle ages, saints were thought to be living in the world, to be a part of it and powerful in its affairs. Altars on churches were only considered ideal if they contained the relic of a saint which would assure a spiritual presence. As time went on, everyone needed a personal patron saint. It was believed that in heaven the saint would act as an agent or representative and would make the case for an individual to God. In many ways, it is similar to getting a defence lawyer to put your case before the judge; the crime has been committed, but depending upon the abilities of the lawyer, the sentence can be harsh or lenient. Similarly, the patron saint is not worshipped but is asked to intercede; to add his (or her) weight to the argument, and to ask God for forgiveness on behalf of the individual. The saint does not forgive - that task is reserved for God alone.

As a result of this belief, the number of patron saints vastly increased and the honour of saints increased to a cult-like status. Statues, paintings, stained-glass windows abounded. It was at about this time that the saints got a bad name as people appeared to pray to them more than to God. This was one of the many things that angered the Reformers. As a result of this, most of the images of saints were removed from churches during the middle of the sixteenth century. Saints (with few exceptions) ceased to be revered but aspired to, that is, they were seen as examples to which we should aim because that would bring us closer to God. Few festivals in honour of saints were retained.

By the first half of the eighteenth century, the fact that a church had had a patron was often forgotten, so far had the removal from Church life had the saints become. A wealthy antiquarian, Brown Willis, decided to find out who they were - he was, in many ways, searching out his local heroes. Unfortunately, he came upon a big problem as the Reformers had done such a good job that there was a complete lack of evidence. So, he hit upon an ingenious idea. Since, in previous times, a church would have a festival on the saint's day, then the church's annual festival should give a clue as to the

original saint to whom it was dedicated. So, for example, if a church held its annual festival on the 23rd April, then it was probably dedicated to Saint George.

This was a nice idea, but not always accurate primarily because, in the northern hemisphere, it's much nicer to hold a festival in the summer than in the winter, so the winter saints were somewhat overlooked. Furthermore, a lot of church festivals were linked with other, non-Christian events. Midsummer's day, for example, was a popular one on which to hold a festival in order to "Christianize" an already acknowledged day of celebration. Willis' method linked churches that held a festival on this day to John the Baptist. In all, a quarter of churches thus designated are thought to have originally had a different saint as patron.

The main thing was that Willis had started a revival in the popularity of saints which gathered momentum during the nineteenth century. Today, saints are very much a part of our church life. But, remember St. Paul's words that they are men and women just like you and me. The New Testament has it that all God's people are saints, we are all set apart ones, we are all special people. That's what he meant when he said we "may know what is the hope to to which he has called you, [...in the...] glorious inheritance among the saints" as we heard in our second reading this morning.

Jesus did not say that to become his saints the road would be an easy one. Instead he made it very clear that it is those who are despised, hated and persecuted who would be eventually the ones who would be his saints in heaven. And that is something to which we must all aim.

We are called to be saints in the battle that Jesus engaged on that mount, two thousand or so years ago. Jesus wants us to fight alongside him, and armed with the same weapons of love and obedience, we too, can be victorious.