**Sermon for All Saints Sunday**

**The Very Reverend Christine Wilson, Dean of Lincoln.**

In the opening words of a number of the letters of St Paul, he addresses the Christian community as the saints and the faithful ones and he goes on to bless them with the grace of God and the peace of Christ.

*So in the language of Paul I greet you this morning as the saints who are in Lincoln and are faithful in Christ Jesus!*

Paul describes the Christian community as set apart, as God’s holy ones, with a sacred calling – the children of God.

As we celebrate All Saint’s Sunday we remember those who have lived out lives of holiness and we are invited to consider our response to that calling to be counted amongst the saints.

In the letter to the Hebrews there is a directive to pursue peace and holiness, without which, we are told, no one will see the Lord. It is a warning that in order to be inheritors of the Kingdom of God we are not to reject this gift of grace.

Today we give thanks for the extraordinary out pouring of the grace of God upon human lives. The work of the Holy Spirit transforming the actions of ordinary men and women, over centuries of Christian witness. In the words of a beautiful funeral prayer we recall those *who shine like stars for all eternity*.

But perhaps more importantly our celebration invites us to consider how we too might become living witnesses to holiness and bearers of the light of Christ.

There was a time when local saints and martyrs were the source of inspiration and legendary stories in the day to day of hum drum living.

They found in their local tales of holy men and women stories of triumph over adversity, acts of glorious heroism in the battles against injustice and examples of enacted hope and goodness in the midst of selfishness, greed and the darkness of the world.

The saints depicted in stained glass and in intricate carvings recorded marvellous stories of a better way and a brighter future.

But, we are all called to be saints and named so through baptism.

So, before we imagine that saintliness and holiness are unattainable to lesser mortals, let me remind you of the swine herd of Stowe immortalised on one of the turrets on the West front of this cathedral, a testimony to how the widow’s mite of this humble local peasant was honoured and remembered as a beautiful gesture of devotion and sacrifice.

Or what about St Gilbert of Sempringham, who began life as a sullen child who neglected his studies and was a disappointment to his Father?

Or the famous St Francis of Assisi described as physically unattractive, possessing no particular gifts or capacities in his youth?

Or St Ignatias of Loyola who was badly disfigured in battle as a young man taking a blow from a cannon ball the size of a fist. It ended his great dream of being a heroic knight of the realm.

It is worth pondering the fact that God so often chooses the most unlikely individuals as channels of grace and holiness.All of us are the earthen vessels which have the potential to contain the treasures of the Kingdom.

Gilbert of Sempringham in a great journey of spiritual conversion, proving his father wrong, went on to be a radical and inclusive educator of girls and boys, both rich and poor, and the founder of the first and only English religious order in the Middle Ages.

St Francis became one of the greatest reformers of his age.

The gift of St Ignatias to the church was his profound writing on prayer in his book The Spiritual Exercises.

All of them faced tough journeys of soul searching in their lives borne of a growing dissatisfaction about the world they encountered. It led to transformation not only of themselves but the many who pondered their stories and found in them a source of encouragement for their own commitment to Christ.

This cathedral was once a place bustling with pilgrims seeking favour and intercession at the tomb of holy St Hugh. People still come to plead before the statue of St Mary in the power of the fullness of the grace and favour she received and in the potency of her prayers.

For centuries the acts of the apostles, the holiness of the Saints and the blood of the martyrs fuelled the church with a fervour to follow in their footsteps. It gave them the faith to believe that nothing is impossible for God. That humanity really can soar to the heights of heaven, share in the life of God and make a difference in the world.

With the enlightenment, saints lost their dazzle and it turned to scientists, inventors and explorers to be the great lives that children sought to follow.

Next it was the glamour of the Hollywood movie stars

And in recent times adulation has been directed at footballers and celebrities.

When it comes to saintliness, we only have to look at the news reports this past week to be reminded once again of the ability to fall from grace. The abuse of power and the lack of holiness that leads to scandal and shame.

We inhabit a world full of uncertainty, disappointment, bad behaviour and an increasing moral bankruptcy. When great institutions and those who are meant to be the exemplars in society are exposed for all their human frailty and weakness disillusionment takes a hold.

But we are a people of hope and from some of my recent conversations it is heartening to know that people still look to holy places and holy people in the search for beacons of light and as sources of inspiration and hope.

Every day both pilgrims and searchers post up prayers of thanksgiving in this cathedral to celebrate the out pouring of God's grace in their lives and the lives of those for whom they care. In fact, the prayer boards appear to be very full of late.

Every day members of the worshipping community gather to pray for the transformation of the world and the renewal of lives.

And no matter how dark or uncertain life may be, we, as living witnesses to grace and renewal have a powerful message to share.

It requires us to be confident and obedient to our calling, keeping faith, celebrating goodness, drawing alongside the lost and the perplexed with the life giving words about the message and story of Christ.

It has been sinners rather than saints who hit the headlines again this week. But the Good News enacted in this eucharist this morning announces forgiveness and the renewal of our lives. It declares that despite our human frailty and our failure to live lives of holiness, every day is a day to begin again with God.

And whilst the path of holiness makes demands on us that set us apart from many of the choices of the world, part God wants to include everyone into the joyful life of the Kingdom. There is grace aplenty.

With God all are welcome, the invitation is to saints and sinners alike.

For those who have said yes to God’s invitation it falls upon us to step up to that calling and be part of the company of living saints, the great cloud of witnesses to the way of Christ.

And that means seeking to be ordinary every day saints, busy making Christ known: enacting hope, brokering peace, exercising forgiveness, making sacrifices for the sake of the Gospel and demonstrating Christ’s radical message of love.

We are called to be the saints in Lincoln, making a difference through faith in Jesus Christ and by the grace and peace of God.