

## **Bonfires**

“Remember, remember, the fifth of November, gunpowder, treason and plot”.

Perhaps this is a saying that will take you, as it does me, back to younger days and in particular the task of collecting firewood for the bonfire and then getting quite excited about seeing it all be stacked up during the day ready to be lit later on that evening. It would be a night of community getting together, drinking warm drinks and eating hot food, normally on a cold night and watching the bonfire burn, feeling its warmth and maybe waving around a sparkler.

As I grew older I began to learn more about what actually lay behind this fun, annual event, and this opened to door to much deeper perspective on what we were actually doing when we were lighting bonfires and setting off fireworks. Of course, recent guests to our country may not be aware, as I wasn't as a young boy, that this all started because something of much greater significance, and far more sinister, in the infamous Gunpowder Plot - which was itself part of a much bigger plan for huge political and religious regime change in Britain.

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## **All Saints Day**

Another annual event, which, in my opinion, is much richer in significance, but not sinister, is All Saints Day, which falls on the first of November and which we are celebrating today.

All Saints Day is a day that is based on an original fourth century commemoration of the early Christian martyrs, many who had lived lives of deep faith, obedience and commitment in establishing Christianity in the hostile world of the Roman Empire. They dedicated their lives to following Jesus and many gave their lives in his service. They challenged the political and religious regimes, not by trying to blow anything up but by preaching the Gospel.

Many of their stories have been preserved in the Church's traditions and some are allocated a day in the calendar when we think about that story and are encouraged to take inspiration from it and to follow *that* Saint's example of character and service.

But, as I say, many of their stories ended in persecution and martyrdom; punished and killed for their beliefs. I often wonder how far I would have gone in those times to be obedient to Christ and the Church, if it meant certain death. How far do I go now when faced

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with a situation that I might find myself, perhaps not at risk of losing my life, but persecuted in other ways: perhaps ridiculed or reviled or being insulted in some way.

Just as Jesus said it would happen in those words from the Sermon on the Mount that we are reminded of on each All Saints Day.

### **A great multitude**

One thing that no doubt gave the Saints their strength was their unwavering belief that they were actually part of something which held a greater and deeper significance and scope.

Some may have been alone physically, and that must have been tough, as it is for many of us who struggle with isolation, but they had the belief that spiritually, they were never alone – they were in fact part of a great multitude, so many that the number was uncountable.

This multitude is what we call in our Creed, the Communion of Saints – the spiritual union of the members of the Christian Church, those living and those who have died. It is what St Paul called the Body of Christ with Christ as the head, in which each of us is a member and contributes in a way that has deeper significance, not just for us, for something *far* greater.

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This multitude or Communion of Saints exists in the heavenly realm that is present wherever God's people are and working to help build for the Kingdom of Heaven to be established on earth. This heavenly realm and this great multitude that surrounded the faithful of the early Church, strengthened them, and assured them they were not alone, but part of something greater than what can be experienced in the physical world.

And this message goes for each one of us today as it did for *them*.

### **Prayer book**

For us, *we* come together in Church for worship; worship which joins that of the great multitude of Saints and Angels that surround us, as we all come before God in praise and prayer.

*And through our prayer* is one of the greatest ways to know this.

These last few weeks across the parish, we have been thinking much about prayer: how prayer is about giving thanks, about asking for help for others and for ourselves, and about receiving forgiveness. Today we are reminded that all our prayers, the prayers we pray together in Church *and* the prayers we pray by ourselves, however we choose to do that, are *all* part of a much greater multitude of others who are praying.

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This multitude consists of Christians around our parish, across our country, and around our entire world; literally we are part of millions of pray-ers; the heavenly multitude also joins us.

And God hears them all, we are assured of that.

But we have also been honest enough to acknowledge that prayer is not easy – to find that assurance that we are indeed part of this multitude can be difficult enough, but often we all might struggle to find that right moment and be in that right state to pray and to find a routine.

So this is where the Church has produced prayer books for us to use. These prayer books create communities of people who seek to do as Jesus taught and pray together for the coming of God's kingdom.

Here, we have produced the Shirley Parish Prayer Book

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([shirleyparishb90.co.uk](http://shirleyparishb90.co.uk))

– a wonderful resource that can help us find a routine that works for us; assure us that we are uniting with other Christian pray-ers across the Parish and beyond; and help us to know that through our

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prayers, we *are* part of a praying community, which *includes* the communion of Saints itself!

So can I encourage you to *use* this Book; either use it by yourself or gather with others and use it together – we will be using this for this afternoon’s Reflective Worship here at 3:30. Do give it a go. Do give it a go.

### **Taking our place**

Well it may not come as a great surprise to you that, whatever your opinion of politics is, Guy Fawkes did *not* make it into the Church’s list of Christian Saints! But if we try and *remember, remember the first of November* as All Saints Day, then whenever we pray, we pray with the rest of the Church, near and far, today and forever.

We will probably not get our name prefixed by the title Saint but that doesn’t matter. Because, whoever and whatever we are - we are all part of something greater than we can possibly imagine; the gathered Church community, the Communion of Saints and the Body of Christ. Amen

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