

Honour the saints among us.

You don't often these days hear the word 'holy' used as an adjective to describe a person or their deeds. More often than not what you hear described is a portrayal of their 'altruism' or their 'philanthropy', and that such deeds have been carried out in a 'selfless' or 'gallant' way. The idea that people and their good deeds might have any notion of 'holiness' conferred upon them would in our secular world, raise that hackles of every humanist worth their salt. Even the Pope is no longer spoken of as 'His Holiness' but simply as 'Pope'. I wonder if this loss is another example of our fear to express our admiration for someone who has done something of value, in words which might afford their deeds quasi religious symbolism.

It raises the interesting question of whether holiness of itself can stand apart from a religious narrative. If we think of all the humanitarian work that is being undertaken in West Africa by medical professionals going over from Europe and elsewhere to combat the spread of the Ebola virus, our first thoughts are that they are all doing something very brave in extremely dangerous conditions. But would you describe both the work and the workers as 'holy'? If one person were motivated by their 'faith' and another by their 'humanism' would you differentiate in using the word *holy* to describe one, and *altruistic* to describe the other? Is it not possible still to describe them both as doing deeds that are holy, even if the humanist would passionately disagree? Certainly Christianity doesn't have a monopoly on goodness, yet at the same time humanism has to consider how and why altruism operates.

St Paul in his letter to the Philippians addresses his readers as *agiois* which we translate as *saints* but which is also used to mean *holy*. Everyone in that small community of believers is so described and I think this should be borne in mind when we come to consider today's celebration. The feast of All Saints is about the *agiois* or the 'holy people' of God. It is an inclusive and not exclusive feast and we should all feel intimately close to each other as we gather. The feast is for you and me, for the people we are, and for the deeds we do, and we should rejoice in describing them all as sacred and holy. Our motivation for such a way of living is inspired by the task we have been given – to bring forth the kingdom. It is achieved by the poor in spirit, the gentle, those who mourn, those who hunger after what is right, by the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers and those who are persecuted in the cause of right, all of which encompasses you, me and the whole span of human kind, made in the image and likeness of God.

So I think it right to use the word *holy* when we speak of deeds that transform lives to make them better so as to bring about reconciliation. It is appropriate to talk of *holy* people who by their love and generosity increase the well of human kindness in the world. But just as important is to recognise where this is happening. It is right that we marvel and admire those who are willing and able to rise to the challenges that confront the world and to offer themselves in a philanthropic way, but similarly let us honour and respect the dignity of those who live out their lives amongst us by simply expressing the gospel of Jesus Christ as he taught us: *Your kingdom come; your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*