

St Michael & All Angels, Chetwynd

The Collect for All Saints' Day

O Almighty God, who hast knit together thine elect in one communion and fellowship, in the mystical body of thy Son Christ our Lord; Grant us grace so to follow thy blessed Saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those unspeakable joys, which thou hast prepared for them that unfeignedly love thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

From the earliest Christian days martyrs, heroes in times of persecution, were commemorated and their tombs venerated. In due course the lives of all Christians who had led inspiring lives were celebrated in this way. Then, by at least the seventh century in western Europe, earlier in the east, the remains of martyrs and Saints were translated into (that is reburied within) churches. The remains might also be divided into fragments and distributed to several churches. On 13 May in 609 (or 610 as some records have it) Pope Boniface IV had twenty-eight wagonloads of martyrs' bones brought to the Pantheon in Rome for the Pantheon's dedication as a church. As a result, 13 May became one of the earliest dates of the celebration of what became the feast of All Saints.

By 800 there is evidence that churches in Ireland and Northumbria were holding a feast commemorating All Saints on 1 November. The Northumbrian monk Alcuin (c735-804), a member of Charlemagne's court, may have been responsible for introducing 1 November as All Saints' Day throughout the Frankish Empire.

The view of the Reformers was that the Saints should be seen as exemplars of those who kept the faith rather than as people to be venerated in their own right. The Latin Saints' Day collects from the Sarum Rite were therefore usually supplanted by newly composed ones. This collect is one such, originally composed for the Prayer Book of 1549. The 1662 revision substituted "blessed" for 1549's *"holy"*, and "in all virtuous and godly living" for *"in all virtues, and godly living"*. Common Worship retains the collect in modern English, replacing "unspeakable" with *"inexpressible"*.

The collect draws on St Paul's depiction of the church as made up of many members who form one body, the body of Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 12 he writes *"there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all….For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ."* (verses 6 & 12). In that chapter, Paul draws an extensive analogy between the human body and the church. The human body is one living organism with many different parts with different functions; so too the church.

All Saints' Day and this collect remind us that we belong together, but that we have different gifts. Today is therefore not only a recognition that some Christian lives stand out inspiringly; it is also an invitation to value church members' different contributions, and to celebrate that we are "knit together…in one communion and fellowship".

James Graham
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