

02 NOVEMBER 2025 A Reflection Rev Wayne Toleafoa

ALL SAINTS SUNDAY

Habakkuk 1: 1-4, 2: 1-4; 2 Thessalonians 1: 1-4, 11-12; Luke 19: 1-10

Today is All Saints Sunday, when traditionally, we look back and remember special people who helped in the formation of our faith.

On this day, we could go with the ‘big, distant picture’ and remember the classical saints like St Columba – the saint who converted the Scots and whose name the parish has adopted.

Or we could go to ‘smaller, but closer saints’ – the people in our lifetimes who influenced us or have led us to faith in Christ.

It’s difficult to define what ‘saint’ means – even for Catholics with their canonization process – but one definition of a ‘saint’ is ‘someone who makes it easier for others to believe in God’.

I can think of a handful of people who have made it easier for me to believe in God. My parish ministers, growing up. My parents - and especially my mother who was like the family saint - always praying for us children and making us feel special. There were also Christian friends and teachers ... all of them were ‘saints’ (small ‘s’) to me.

I spent one year at a catholic school where one of the Marist brothers was like a saint to me. Such a great example of a very ‘human’ man devoted to a sacrificial religious life – but full of joy! He made it easier for me to believe in God.

You will have your own saints – large and small. Saintly figures like Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, Billy Graham, St Paul and the Biblical saints – your mother perhaps, people who have made it easy for you to believe in God. Today, we remember them.

Sometimes the Revised Common Lectionary readings for Sunday seem rather eclectic, with no obvious common theme - and perhaps we should leave it at that - and not try to manufacture or force a theme onto the readings.

The compilers of the Revised Common Lectionary attempt to cover the main stories of the Bible in a three-year cycle.

A three-year cycle which coincides with the life of Jesus, from his birth to his resurrection.

I often joke about my long ministry and tell people, that ‘Jesus only had to do it for three years! (But I’m lucky I get to retire at the end of my ministry)’.

Each year the RCL focuses on one or other of the gospels. This year, we are focused on the gospel of Luke.

We meet Jesus again through the eyes of Luke, who was not one of the original apostles. Luke was probably a disciple of Peter, who gave Luke his first-hand information about Jesus. Luke was the historian of the Early Church.

Over 3 years, we get to follow the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth and, from the stories, learn what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

In his second letter to his young disciple Timothy, St Paul wrote that, ‘all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,’ (2 Tim 3:16).

What Paul meant by ‘scripture’ was of course the Hebrew Scriptures or what we know as the Old Testament.

The Bible as we have it - wasn’t finalized until long after Paul’s death. In fact, what we call the ‘canon’ or the authorized collection of the books of the Bible, wasn’t finalized until the 4th century AD. I won’t explain this morning how that came about.

Even Paul’s Letters have now become part of the canon/collection of our Christian Scriptures. Christians claim that his Letters are, ‘God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness’.

Our readings for today no doubt serve that purpose of teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.

Habakkuk 1:1–4; 2:1–4

Our first reading today is from the obscure Book of the Prophet Habakkuk.

At Knox College we used to take turns at doing early morning chapel. I remember one of my friends doing chapel and frantically looking through the large pulpit Bible trying to find the Book of Habakkuk. In the end he went to the index in the front of the Bible.

Lesson – if you’re going to use Habakkuk in public worship – be prepared!

Habakkuk delivered his prophecy around 612–605 BCE, during the rise of the Babylonian Empire and the decline of Assyria.

Judah, where Habakkuk prophesied, was caught between the fading power of Assyria and the emerging dominance of Babylon. Habakkuk’s prophecy reflects his deep concern over injustice and violence, both within Judah and from foreign powers.

It is still a very inspiring and beautiful book, despite its gloomy setting. In Biblical literature it falls into the literary genre of 'Laments'. Laments which often begin with a gloomy question and end with a hopeful answer.

Habakkuk asks the question, 'when will God come to save his people'? the kind of questions that persecuted people ask of God.

I can just imagine Christians in Ukraine and even Russia asking 'when will the misery end?'

Christians and other faiths are being persecuted all around the world. The Muslims in Gaza and Myanmar are probably asking the same lamentful question. 'When will our misery end?'

Habakkuk asks the difficult question of God and God's reply is a difficult one to receive. 'Wait, and trust in God's justice...'

Habakkuk is given a vision of a restored and renewed Israel.

Habakkuk's prophecy will resonate with communities and people longing for justice.

2 Thessalonians 1:1–4, 11–12

Very briefly, our second reading contains the theme of 'endurance, divine calling and glorifying Christ'.

Paul commends the Thessalonians for growing in faith and love (vs1-4).

They are becoming the model Christian community. They are helping one another to grow in faith. They have become saints towards one another.

Paul praises their perseverance under persecution and believes that God is transforming them through that experience of hardship. That God is making them more resilient and worthy of their calling. They are glorifying Christ through their faithfulness under persecution.

Perhaps we can learn from that community and think of ourselves as saints who are building up one another's faith. We can also be grateful that we are not being persecuted and are free to worship as we wish.

Luke 19: 1- 10. Zaccheus

Finally, our gospel story is the well-known story of Zaccheus the Tax Collector. The main theme of this story is Jesus' radical love and inclusion of people whom others reject.

It is also a story of repentance and transformation.

Tax collectors in the days of the Roman Empire were like franchise holders. They would purchase a franchise over a segment of a Roman City or region and collect the taxes in that city or region.

The Roman authorities would calculate what the region was worth in terms of taxes and give that figure to the chief tax collector. He would collect the estimated tax for Rome - and he was authorised to add his own commission on to the tax.

Some chief tax collectors were so wealthy that they could afford to subcontract (if you like) and hire other tax collectors as assistants.

Zaccheus was a chief tax collector. And like many other tax collectors he was probably unpopular. Collecting taxes from his own people to pay a foreign master.

It's quite a winsome story. Zaccheus hears that the Rabbi Jesus will be passing by. So, he climbs a tree to get a better view of him.

Luke tells us that the other reason why he climbs the tree is that he is 'vertically challenged' i.e. he was either a dwarf or a man of small stature.

We don't know why he was so fascinated with Jesus, but as Jesus was passing by, surrounded by a bustling crowd, Jesus looked up into the tree where Zaccheus was hiding, and invited himself to dinner at Zaccheus' house.

Zaccheus response was (as we know) remarkable: He came down from the tree, led Jesus to his home and he promised to give half of his wealth to the poor, and to pay back four-fold, anyone who he had defrauded.

We don't know how wealthy he was, or how many people he had defrauded – may be none – which is why he offered to pay back four-fold.

What ever happened that day, we know that Zaccheus' life was transformed by his encounter with Jesus.

We believe that anyone who has committed their lives to Christ experiences a transformation. Sometimes our transformation takes a long time - sometimes it can be immediate and dramatic like the transformation of Zaccheus.

Many of the characters in the Bible stories later became saints. We know their names: Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of Jesus, all the apostles (less Judas) became saints. And others like Luke (who was not an apostle) became 'saints'.

One tradition has it that Zaccheus became a follower of the apostle Peter and followed him on his missionary journeys.

Zaccheus became a saint in the Eastern Orthodox church and was also venerated in the Roman catholic church. Another tradition has it, that Zaccheus became first Bishop of Jerusalem and Casarea.

Whatever tradition we accept, we learn from the story of Zaccheus that Jesus embraced and accepted people whom others thought unacceptable. Jesus was able to transform lives and transform communities who accepted him as their Lord.

Let us pray that the Spirit of Christ will continue to transform us and continue to transform the church so that we can lead others to encounter the living Christ.

PRAYER

God of justice and mercy,
You hear the cries of the troubled and the weary,
and in your steadfast love, you answer with vision and hope.
As you called Zacchaeus down from the tree,
call us from our places of hiding and fear,
that we may receive your grace with joy and respond with lives transformed.
Strengthen us, like Habakkuk, to stand watch and wait for your word,
and grant us faith that does not falter in the face of delay.
By your Spirit, make us worthy of your calling,
so that in all we do, your name may be glorified.
Through Jesus Christ, who seeks and saves the lost,
and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.