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Let us pray.

**O** ALMIGHTY God, look mercifully upon the world which thou hast redeemed by the blood of thy dear Son, and incline the hearts of many to dedicate themselves to the sacred ministry of thy Church; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Good morning and welcome!

Have you ever had a song stuck in your head?

I think everyone has, and for the sake of our collective sanity, I won't name any that come to mind.

Well, when considering this Sunday's sermon, one song got stuck there, and I couldn't dislodge it no matter what I did.

You see, my plan was to talk about saints...and there goes that song again...

Since this Sunday is in such close proximity to the Feast of All Saints, I thought it appropriate to examine what a saint was.

I mean, we hear all about saints, even in our allegedly post-Christian culture. What is a saint?

We need to start with a definition – I personally like the one I was directed to on Wikipedia.

“A Saint is a holy person”<sup>1</sup>

OK, I appreciated the brevity, but that’s all – I needed more, so next I went to the idea of holiness.

To be holy – a holy person is one dedicated to the sacred. In a Christian’s life, holiness is what we mean when we think of a person as particularly observant of Jesus’ teachings. Living into that life is what brings them closer to Him, the Holy One.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint>

Then, as the believer is moving ever closer to Him, they notice that, as time and faith move on, they are moving out of phase with the world.

I think all believers have been there, seemingly more often in the last few years – we have certain beliefs, which more and more now don't agree with the world.

That distancing effect is something Jesus mentioned in John 17 when He said:

“They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world,”<sup>2</sup>

As the believer lives out his life and gets closer to Jesus, he starts to move away from the world. Sanctification is another word for this, it refers to:

“a state of separation unto God; all believers enter into this state when they are born of God ...[it is a] practical experience of this separation unto God...the effect of obedience to the Word of God in one's life”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John 17:16

So, we start with faith and belief and following Him and absorbing His Word. As we get closer to Him, we shrink away from the falsehood of the world and we are drawn to His truth, and begin to separate ourselves spiritually, emotionally and sometimes physically.

This is how one starts to become a saint. What's the next step?

I guess we need to next turn to some examples - Who do we think of when we talk about saints?

Well, a lot of them were monks, such as St Francis, and there are St Benedict and St. Bernard of Clairvaux . These men all left affluent lives to follow God, and are excellent examples of those that walked away from the world to live in His presence.

That seems like a tall order – as believers, we are called to be separate, but we need to be in the world, to act as His Hands and Feet. The isolation of a monastery, while attractive for a

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.gotquestions.org/sanctification.html>

time, is something many will never attain. So can we find some more realistic saints?

I would suggest that a saint that many can relate to is St Augustine of Hippo.

This is a man who wrote his *Confessions*, written from the hindsight of a believer who realizes what his world and life had been like if he had only paid attention to God, and not the physical world along the way. The man himself was a learned man, and quite typical of his era.

What changed him? He notes that there was a keen awareness that he needed something, and he sought this first in philosophies, and in things of the world, music, theater.

This started early - as a teen or young adult, he uttered his famous quote,

“Grant me purity and self control, but not yet”<sup>4</sup>

It wasn't until age 33 he read Romans 13:13-14 and his life changed - the event is described in this way:

“Augustine's final conversion at the end of Book 8 is the most famous episode from the *Confessions*. In a moment of intense emotional crisis, Augustine hears a mysterious child's voice chanting, "Take and read, take and read." When he does so, he encounters Romans 13:13–14, and the passage abruptly lays to rest all his doubts and fears about leaving his old life behind. In a way, it is almost a fairy-tale ending: Augustine has been desperately looking for certainty his entire spiritual life, and here, in one moment of clarity, he gets the relief that only absolute certainty can give him”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augustine\\_of\\_Hippo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augustine_of_Hippo)

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.cliffsnotes.com/study\\_guide/literature/St-Augustine-s-Confessions-Summary-and-Analysis-Book-8-Chapters-5-12.id-166,pageNum-20.html](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/study_guide/literature/St-Augustine-s-Confessions-Summary-and-Analysis-Book-8-Chapters-5-12.id-166,pageNum-20.html)

Incidentally, the text he read was as follows:

Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy.<sup>14</sup> But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires

St Augustine's spirit was moved to convert, and from this, one of the most important Christian theologians and saints was converted to Christ.

We read this book and actually feel his visceral attraction to the world and unwillingness to let go of it. In many ways, we feel that we all read all about ourselves in those pages. It typifies the Christian experience across the ages – that tug of war between the world and Christ.

So we have many examples, as the song says, of doctors and soldiers and queens, all seen as saints. We have the monks that left the world to devote their lives to Him. And we have St Augustine of Hippo, that worldly man, who nods at us across the ages, recognizing our frustrations.

But he turned away. They all turned away from the world and its lures. What makes them so very different from us? Is it the small voice and conversion experience of St Augustine that we all need? A mountaintop moment?

I would say no. Sin separates us from God. To sin is to allow the process of temptation to complete and we are all offered that chance to turn away, as St Paul notes in his first letter to the church at Corinth:

<sup>3</sup>No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure<sup>6</sup>

Every person has lived with a hunger for God, a desire that in our human way, leads us to the wrong solution. As noted by the philosopher Blaise Pascal:

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Cor.%2010:13&version=ESV>

**[Man] tries in vain to fill [the void] with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself”<sup>7</sup>**

When we look at the saints, we see people that God has granted a great gift to – He has allowed them to see themselves for what they are, what they truly seek, and they fell to their knees, and surrendered their will for His, in exchange for the life He gave.

But it isn't a gift solely for them alone. It is for all mankind.

And we can follow their example now, as noted in the song – many do today:

“They lived not only in ages past,

There are hundreds of thousands still,

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<sup>7</sup> Pascal, Blaise, *Pensees* (New York; Penguin Books, 1966). P 75

The world is bright with the joyous saints

Who love to do Jesus' will.

You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea,

In church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea,

For the saints of God are just folk like me,

And I mean to be one too.”<sup>8</sup>

Thanks be to God we have that opportunity, to turn to Him  
and truly follow.

Let us pray:

ALMIGHTY God, our heavenly Father, who declarest thy glory and showest forth thy handiwork in the heavens and in the earth; Deliver us, we beseech thee, in our several callings, from the service of mammon, that we may do the work which thou givest us to do, in truth, in beauty, and in righteousness, with singleness of heart as thy servants, and to the benefit of our fellow men; for the sake of him who came among us as one that serveth, thy Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

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<sup>8</sup> <http://topmostapple.blogspot.com/2005/11/i-sing-song-of-saints-of-god.html>

