

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	11 October 2026
Service:	Eucharist, Wilfrid
Preacher:	The Revd Canon Dr Earl Collins, Chancellor

The Church of England celebrates those special figures in Christian history whom we call 'the saints.' But we do not have the complex procedure of canonisation that other churches have, to determine whether someone should be entered in our calendar as an example of Christian living. We follow instead the older practice by which individuals are recognised by local communities as good examples and thus begin to be celebrated in the Church's services.

But in truth there is only one Saint, just as there is only one High Priest, one Shepherd and one Sacrifice – and that is Jesus Christ our Lord. He alone, the Son of God made flesh who died for our sins and was raised from the dead to give us life - he alone is the 'Holy One of God.' We have just heard that proclaimed in the Gloria – 'You alone are holy, you alone are Lord!'

St Paul in his letters does call Christians 'saints' because we are members of Christ's body. But Paul repeatedly insists that such holiness is never ours by right. It is always Christ's holiness in which we participate, and we cannot therefore boast about our own merits or achievements.

By grace, the Lord Jesus shares his holiness with us but only insofar as we 'put on Christ.' The surest sign of such sharing in Christ's holiness is when, as St John wrote, we live the same kind of life that Christ lived, a life of love and service of others for the glory of God. That is true sanctity - Christian holiness - and there is no other kind.

In today's Gospel we hear that Peter fell down before Jesus when he witnessed the miracle at the Sea of Galilee. Peter sensed that he was in the presence of someone special to God and sensed as well his own unworthiness to be there. Hence his dramatic words, 'Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man.'

Peter could hardly have confessed at that point the whole truth about Jesus as we will do so shortly in the Creed – that he is God's incarnate Son. Full recognition of that needed the death and resurrection of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Even then, it took several centuries before the Church developed the words needed to confess who Jesus truly is. But Peter certainly recognised in Jesus the presence of the Holy One of Israel.

Centuries before, one of Israel's greatest prophets, Isaiah, had reacted in a similar way to Peter when he had an experience of God in the Temple at Jerusalem. Isaiah exclaimed, 'I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell among a people of unclean lips, yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.' But God reached out and purified him. In a similar way, Jesus reassured Peter, telling him, as he so often does in the Gospels not to be afraid.

Why did that happen to Peter? What was it all about? I think the key word is vocation – calling. Peter was called by God to a mission prepared for him from before the foundation of the world. He was called to be an apostle, indeed the leader of the apostles, a witness to the resurrection of Christ. Peter and the other apostles, like the prophets before them, were anything but plaster saints. Like all of us, they were deeply limited human beings. They all betrayed Jesus in his hour of need, running away in the garden when he was arrested. Peter led them in that as well, cursing and swearing that he did not even know who Jesus was.

Paul too - called after Christ's resurrection - had previously devoted his energies to eliminating the message of the Gospel. Today we call them saints. We paint their icons, raise up statues of them,

dedicate churches to them, and celebrate them in our worship as we are doing in this service. But that is all well and good because while Christ certainly took them as they were, he did not leave them there – he transformed them.

God purified them, leading them through suffering to the point where they could even give their lives for the message of the Gospel. Tradition tells us that Peter and Paul both died as martyrs in Rome. A disciple, as Jesus had said, is never greater than his master - and they were disciples of a crucified Messiah.

Which brings me to today's celebration. Normally a saint's festival falling on a Sunday falls away, in favour of what we celebrate every Sunday, the death and resurrection of Christ. But an exception is made for the patron saint of a cathedral or a parish church, which is what we are doing today.

In this cathedral, dedicated principally to the Holy Trinity, we commemorate two founders: St Wilfrid, who established this diocese originally at Selsey Island though he died back in the north of England; and St Richard, whose shrine graces the eastern end of the building. Whatever about St Richard, I think I am glad that I did not have to serve as a priest while Wilfrid was bishop here.

He comes across in contemporary sources as an extremely determined, confrontational, even belligerent individual. I suspect that nowadays he might not get through the Vatican's strict procedures for declaring a saint – though perhaps those procedures are a bit too strict anyway.

Like Wilfrid, there were other saints in the Early Church who were anything but meek and mild followers of Jesus. One of the most famous, whom we recently celebrated, is the pugnacious and sometimes acid-tongued St Jerome. Once, having received a letter from a priest asking him to write a poem in praise of the Easter

Candle, Jerome replied that God had not put him on earth to write poetry to lumps of wax!

But there was much more to him than an irascible temperament and a sharp tongue. He also had the gift of languages. We celebrate St Jerome every year because through his wonderful work of translation he gave the Church a Latin version of the Bible that became an inestimable gift.

It spread the Word of God far beyond the small Greek and Aramaic-speaking areas where it had originated.

Like all the saints - like Peter and Paul - like all of us - Jerome was a creature of flesh and blood, full of faults and failings. So too was Wilfrid. But they all knew that God had come to us in Christ and they did their best to follow him throughout their lives. Venerating their memory and vocation does not mean that we will always like them personally. But we should recognise that in their own ways they, like us, tried, with all their human limitations, faithfully to follow our Lord.

All of them knew that there is indeed but one true Saviour and Saint. All of them learnt by personal experience what Paul wrote to the Corinthians: we hold this precious treasure of the Gospel in earthen vessels, because then people can see that the glory is to be given not to us as Christ's disciples but to God alone. After all, as Paul reminded us today, God's power is best revealed in human weakness.

With St Wilfrid our first founder, and with all the saints, let us give thanks today to God. He does indeed take us as we are. But he also has the power to make something more of us – to remake us in the image of his only Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who died and was raised on high for our salvation. To him – who alone is holy, who alone is Lord - be the glory, now and forever. Amen.