

Things Consider

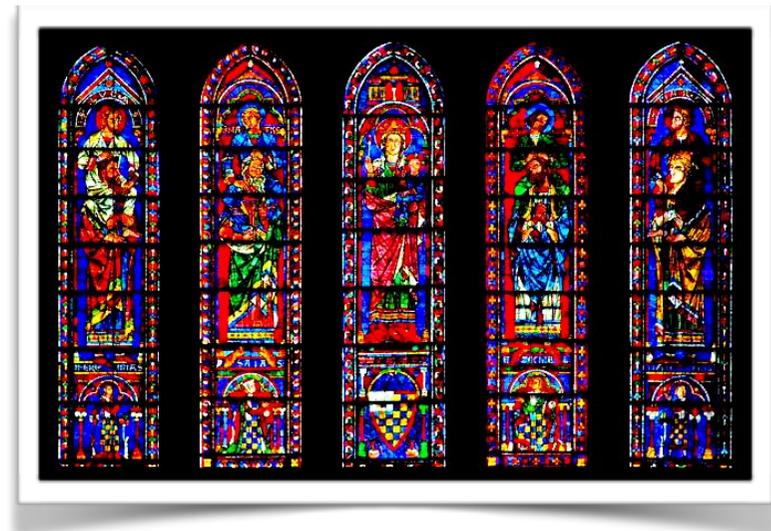
- ▶ When you go into a church either for a service of worship or just for some time of quiet, sit down and just be still. Allow yourself to make that transition from what you have previously been doing to this present moment of being present with God.
- ▶ Look around to see if there are any stained glass windows with images of saints. They can serve as reminders of those who have gone before. If there are not, simply remember all who have gone before you in this church down through the years.
- ▶ These reflections remind us that we are never alone, but always in the company of the saints who have gone before. We live in an age of individualism where we think it's totally up to us; it's whether we succeed or not; it's what I do that makes all the difference; an age of who is in and who is out. The truth is we are all in this life together; there is a corporate sense to our lives. We ride on the shoulders of those who have gone on ahead. When you think about it, it is strange that we should think otherwise.
- ▶ Think about those particular people whom you have known and loved, who have helped to give shape to your life and who now stand in the nearer presence of God. Give thanks to God for them and go on doing this in your personal prayers.
- ▶ Almighty God, we rejoice to know
that your reign extends far beyond the limits of this life.
In the mystery of what lies beyond our sight
we pray that your love may complete its work
in those whose days on earth are done;
and grant that we who serve you now in this world
may at last share with them
the glories of your heavenly kingdom;
through the love of Jesus Christ our Lord.

(Source unknown; quoted in *New Parish Prayers* ed. by Frank Colquhoun) ATG/B13/MBH

Attending to God

'The Communion of Saints'

Part I



These five beautiful lancet windows are in the South Transept of Chartres Cathedral in France. The central one has the Virgin Mary holding the infant Christ, but it is the other four on which I ask you to focus.

These four show the evangelists sitting on the shoulders of four Old Testament prophets. They serve as visual reminders that we all ride on the shoulders of those who have gone before and this helps to make us who we are: genetically, intellectually, spiritually and practically. It is the parent teaching the child how to cook; the master teaching the apprentice their skill; the teacher imparting knowledge to the student; the guide sharing wisdom and faith being passed on to the next generation.

It is a reminder that we are always part of a community and it can include not just those of us who are living, but also those who have gone before and who stand in the nearer presence of God. As we grow increasingly older, we at some point realise that the latter for us holds more people we know than the former!

There is a phrase that speaks of all these people, both living and departed, and that is the *communion of saints*. In the Apostles' Creed towards its end we say, 'I believe in ... the communion of saints'. So what does this mean?

The word *communion* means 'fellowship', a 'gathering'; it speaks of a living relationship between people. That word *communion* is a very biblical word. We gather as a community in worship; we speak of our belonging to the worldwide Anglican communion.

And that word *saint*: We might think of it as only referring to those very holy people who have died and who have been officially given this title by the Church. In fact in this context of the *communion of saints* it also refers to all Christians. We are all the saints of God. As an example, the Letter to the Ephesians begins 'To the saints who are in Ephesus ...' (1.1)

This communion of all the saints, whether living or departed, speaks of a union that is there between us all as Christians and finds its meeting point in Jesus Christ. He is the One who holds us together. '*In Christ*' we are all a 'new creation' (2 Corinthians 5.17). Paul also writes of those who have died and their place in the resurrection of the dead when he says 'for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive *in Christ*' (1 Corinthians 15.22).

In this and the next brochure my focus is not on ourselves, the saints now living, and our fellow Christians, but rather, on that great company of the departed in Christ. As I said, these too are the saints of God. Through death they have journeyed on and now stand in God's nearer presence. But I also believe they are, in a paradoxical way, closer to us than we might imagine. So how can that be?

If you have ever stood in an ancient church you may have had a sense of the past and the present merging. Yes, at one level it is our imagination, but there is also a sense in which the walls and space seeming to hold the memories and presence of all who have gone before. And, it is all happening in the present moment. It is as if the walls have been soaked in the prayers of those who have gone on.

There is a wonderful passage in Hebrews 12.1-3 reminding us that we are surrounded by a 'great cloud of witnesses' and thus we should never lose heart, but 'run the race set before us' with 'our eyes fixed on Jesus'. In an age which can despise the invisible, it is important that we do not lose heart, but hold on to the Faith that has been entrusted to us and pass it on to others, particularly the next generation. It is as if we are in the Olympics, running the race of a life-time and we now hold the baton ready to pass it on to the person ahead. The stadium is filled to capacity with those who have gone before us, and they are cheering us on.

The theologian Jürgen Moltmann, writes that in the base communities in South America where, during the dictatorships, numbers of people disappeared and were presumably murdered, their names would be read out loud as if a roll were being called. Members of the congregation would, in response, call out 'Presente'. As Moltmann commented, 'The community of the living and the dead is the praxis of resurrection hope'. Members of the congregation knew in their hearts that these others were probably dead, but at the same time in their hearts they also knew they were still very much alive. Together they were all '*in Christ*'.

May each of us, who in the phrase of L. William Countryman, 'live on the borders of the Holy', live with that awareness that we are a part of the communion of saints that embraces not just the living on this side of the border, but also the departed on the other. The veil can be thin as the ancient Celtic church reminds us and together, living and departed, we are all '*in Christ*'.