

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts.”

Is 6:3

For most people, including many faithful Catholics who come to Mass Sunday by Sunday the idea of holiness is, perhaps, a rather vague and nebulous prospect. Most of us do not think of ourselves as holy which, by and large, is a good thing. Thinking that we are holy is the surest sign that we are not! But most of us probably do not think that we can even become holy in this life. After all, isn't that just for the professionally religious people like priests, and monks, and nuns? And anyway, what *is* holiness? A good question in a Holy Year!

First, we must remember that there is only One who is holy, and that is God Himself. God is the definition of holiness. Holiness is what God is.

To know what holiness is, then, means getting to know God. We need to know *about* God and we need to know Him *as a living being*, as a Person, or as Three Persons to be precise. And it is precisely because God is so utterly transcendent, so totally beyond us, so completely *other*, that the Son of God became Incarnate and came down to earth in human form in the first place. Our Blessed Lord is, as St Paul says elsewhere, ‘the image of the invisible God’ (Col 1:15). We cannot see God, so the Son of God has come down to earth to show us what He looks like, so that we can see Him and be like Him. When the Apostle Philip demanded, ‘Lord, show us the Father!’ Our Lord replied, ‘He that sees me, sees the Father also’ (Jn 14:8-9).

Christ, then, is the perfect image of the Father, the perfect model of holiness. If we wish to know what holiness is, then it is to Christ that we must turn.

‘But,’ we might cry, ‘I can never become like Our Lord! That is too great a demand, too heavy an expectation!’ To which all the spiritual writers reply, That is both true and not true at the same time.

First, in His Sermon on the Mount, Christ exhorts us to be ‘perfect, as also your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Mt 5:48). Our Lord lays it down as a precept that we must follow the way of perfection and strive after holiness. Nor does He demand of us something that is impossible! There would be no point in God demanding something of His creatures that they could never give! Instead, Our Lord lays out before us the model of holiness, along with guidelines that we can follow. The first step towards holiness, then, is to become familiar with Christ, to know Him, and to love Him. And the place to start that journey is with the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Indeed, St Jerome goes on to point out that the whole of the Bible makes Christ known to us, and that ‘ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.’¹

The Bible, and especially the Gospels, give us a distilled picture of Christ and therefore of holiness. Yet even with the Scriptures in front of us we sometimes feel the task – the job of growing in holiness – to be too great, the very idea too unapproachable. Where do we start?

We start with prayer, and more will be said about the nature of prayer – and how to pray – throughout the Holy Year. For the moment, we shall limit our comments on prayer to encouraging everyone to have some form of daily routine of prayer, for example by making use of the little booklets freely available at the back of church, ‘Morning and Nights Prayers for Busy People.’

But today I particularly want to encourage people to look to the examples of the saints. The saints are the ones who got it right. They may not have got every single action

¹ *Commentariorum in Isaiam libri xviii prol.*: PL 24, 17B.

right in the course of their lives, but by the very fact that the Church now holds them up to us as models of holiness we can say that the saints are the ones who put into practice the teachings and precepts of Christ, who walked in His footsteps, who placed themselves upon His Cross alongside Him, and who conformed themselves to the likeness of Christ in every regard.

The saints show us how to be like Christ. They are the ones who have conformed themselves to His likeness, and have re-shaped their lives according to the mould Christ has put before us. They are the ones who have lived out a life of holiness in the day to day practicalities of life here on earth.

It is good to have a devotion to many saints, but I am going to suggest that we do well to choose just one favourite saint and to use him or her as a model of what being like Christ means in practice.

Read the life of your chosen saint; pray every single day to your chosen saint; and begin to imitate the virtues of your chosen saint. Decide for yourself that you are going to become like Christ after the model of your chosen saint.

That's the place to start. Make this promise to Our Lord name: 'I shall become more like to you each day of this Holy Year after the model of my chosen saint.'

And we shall hear more about this template of holiness as the year goes on.