All Saints' Day
1 November 2022
Worcester Cathedral

In 1957 Mowbray's published 'My Book of the Christian Year'. A collection of illustrations of the seasons, festivals, and holy days of the Church of England calendar beautifully painted by Enid Chadwick. The images have become classic representations and are often republished online. The page for All Saints' Day shows the Lamb of God enthroned on an altar with incense at his feet, angels and cherubs in attendance and, in a wonderfully ordered semi-circle the saints are gathered in worship around the throne of the Lamb. In the centre of the arc of saints and immediately at the foot of the Lamb of God is Mary.

Two things strike me about this image: firstly, that the saints, in all their coloured robes, are standing rather than kneeling. It is as if they are ready for action, their place in heaven leading them into active worship and intercession – playing their part in the saving work of Christ. A reminder that the saints in heaven – whose earthly life is complete – are active in our lives through their heavenly worship, their intercessions for the world, and their witness to the life of Christ which inspires us in our day. They are not dead to us or to God, but they are fully alive and, like lights upon our path, shine on our own Christian pilgrimage through life – buoying us, encouraging us, and giving us confidence that we too can overcome all things and tread this path of holiness.

The second thing I notice about this image is that although the saints depicted are not named – only Mary is obvious – they are grouped rather neatly into categories. Of course, these are categories often used in the Church's liturgical calendar: there are apostles in the centre, martyrs and virgins to the left, confessors and doctors of the Church to the right. There are, thankfully, some women among the cloud of witnesses, but all are grouped into classes of saints which we may not easily find ourselves relating to.

I know that when I was younger I had slightly unfinished ideas of what All Saints' Day was about. At first, I thought it was all the named saints bundled into one easy festival package, then I thought it was the mopping up type feast of those not considered important to have their own day. You have these strange thoughts when you are young!

But I soon came to realise that it was both of these and so much more – a vast, celestial celebration of the known, the unknown, the well-known, the lesser-known, the famous, the forgotten, the memorable, and the forgettable. The classes and types becoming less important than their witness down the centuries which we inherit as pilgrims in our day. We are guided by the saints we know but we are also guided, in to-us-unknown ways, by the nameless saints whose witness to truth and love has shaped the Church and the world which we know.

After we have received communion, we shall sing *Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones*. With the whole company of heaven, and sanctified by receiving the Body and Blood of Our Lord, we shall unite our earthly voices with angels, archangels and the whole company of heaven. And in this hymn we shall once again praise our way through categories and types: first of angels: Seraphs, Cherubim and Thrones, Dominions, Princedoms, Powers. And then Mary, Bearer of the eternal Word, who leads our praises, and on to Patriarchs and Prophets blest, the holy Twelve, the Martyrs strong, and all Saints triumphant.

But we are not spectators of this heavenly host, we address them as friends, as brothers and sisters of one family. The Church Militant here in earth one in praise with the Church Triumphant. We are as one, our earthly lives – as imperfect as they are – offered in union with those whose work is done. Today we celebrate our hope of heaven because of the grace and mercy of God shown to us in the lives of all his saints.

O blest communion, fellowship divine!
we feebly struggle, they in glory shine;

yet all are one in thee, for all are thine. Alleluia, alleluia.

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