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All Saints 2022

At the beginning of the twelfth century, Europe experienced a new kind of Christian. A young man from Burgundy persuaded his four brothers, together with 30 young noblemen of the region, to join him in entering the monastery of Citeaux, a few miles south of Dijon. Two years later he set up a new monastery, and from that date on the new order of Cistercian monks spread rapidly. By the end of the century there were over 500 Cistercian abbeys throughout Western Europe. They revolutionized sheep farming, transformed agriculture, and created our modern notion of water drainage. The man whose leadership inspired this remarkable movement became one of the most influential figures in the political life of his day. He wrote the rules of the order of Knights Templar, secured the victory of the Pope when the legitimacy of Innocent II's election was challenged, managed to get his own man made Pope in 1145, and intervened to protect the Jews when a wave of persecution swept Central Europe.

The name of this remarkable person was St Bernard of Clairvaux. A great number of people seem to assume that the future of the Church depends on God raising up a modern-day hero of the St Bernard type. The Church is going through a crisis of self-esteem, with one-third insisting we return to the old ways, another third proclaiming that the old ways are bunk and only new ways will do, and the last third saying don't panic, God is the same God and hasn't given up on us, you'll see. Every new leader is assaulted by an array of overwhelming and mutually contradictory projections and expectations, agreeing on only one thing: things are in a veritable mess, and you are just the person to sort it out.

The second reason, and in fact the real reason, why I have reminded you of St Bernard is not because he was a hero for our times. We live in an age that isn't quite sure what it thinks about heroes. Of course we get very excited about the kinds of heroes that are outstanding physical specimens. We are drawn by the magnetic appeal of a beautiful face, a lightning fast runner, an explosive boxer or a shapely singer with a feathery voice. Such people raise us out of the ordinary rhythm of life, and help us see human potential on a higher plane. We also applaud the kind of person who emerges from obscurity to perform a spontaneous act of astonishing courage – laying their own body down to form a human bridge as fellow passengers scuttle out of a sinking ship, or plunging into a

burning building to rescue a screaming child from the flames. Such people unsettle our gnawing cynicism, and help us believe in the goodness of our fellow human beings.

And we are open, in our lyrical moments, to celebrating heroism in the domestic sphere, to holding up our grandmother as a selfless warrior for family harmony, or enthroning our neighbor as the true embodiment of affability and goodwill. Such celebrations enhance our democratic desire to get away from the elitism of the hero, to flatten out any notion that heroism requires a Herculean effort of discipline and will. Everyone has the right to be a hero, we feel, and it shouldn't be restricted to those with aptitude, effort and skill.

So we're not sure what to make of St Bernard, and while we want our leaders to do remarkable things, we don't want them to make us feel small, either. But what I want to tell you today is that St Bernard wasn't a hero. There's no place for heroes in the kingdom of God. St Bernard was a saint. Do you know how many times the word 'hero' is used in the New Testament? Zero. And do you know how many times the word 'saint' occurs? Sixty-four. What is the difference between a hero and a saint? I'm going to suggest five differences.

To start with, think about the kind of story that is told about heroes, and compare that with the story that is told about saints. The hero always makes a decisive intervention at a moment when things are looking like they could all go badly wrong. The hero steps up and makes everything turn out right. In other words, the hero is always at the centre of the story, typically the protagonist. By contrast, the saint is not necessarily a crucial character. The saint may be almost invisible, easily missed, quickly forgotten. The hero's story is always about the hero. The saint is always at the periphery of a story that is always really about God. For the saint, God is the great protagonist. Think about the stories you tell about yourself. Are you the hero at the centre of the story, or the saint, at the periphery of God's story?

Next, think about why the story is told. The hero's story is always told to celebrate the virtues of the hero. The hero's strength, courage, wisdom, or great timing: these are the qualities on which the hero's decisive intervention rests. I once had a teacher my classmates and I used to call Chiefly Instrumental. That was because in every one of his stories, he'd been chiefly instrumental in bringing about great

initiative or achievement. Others were involved, but he made the decisive intervention. He was the hero of every one of his own stories. By contrast the saint may well not have any great qualities. The saint may not be strong, brave, clever or opportunistic. But the saint is faithful. The story of the hero is told to rejoice in valor. The story of the saint is told to celebrate faith. Think about the stories you tell about yourself. Are you chiefly instrumental? Or are you just glad to be part of the story?

Third, think about what the story takes for granted. The definitive heroic icon is the soldier, who is prepared to risk death for the sake of a higher good. The noblest death is death in battle, for battle offers the greatest danger, thus requiring the greatest courage. The story assumes that in a world of limited resources, there's bound to be conflict at some stage so that good may prevail. But saints assume a very different story. They don't need to learn how to fight over competing goods, because Christ has fought for and secured the true good, and the goods that matter now are not limited or in short supply. Love, joy, peace, faithfulness, gentleness – these do not rise or fall with the stock market. The saints' story doesn't presuppose scarcity; it doesn't require the perpetuation of violence. Whereas the icon of heroism is the soldier, the icon of sanctity is the martyr. The soldier faces death in battle; the martyr faces death by not going to battle. The soldier's heroism is its own reward: it makes sense in any language that respects nobility and aspires to greatness. The martyr's sanctity makes no sense unless rewarded by God: it has no place in any story except that of Christ's redeeming sacrifice and the martyr's heavenly crown. Think about the stories you tell about yourself. Are you the hero, gaining the reward, or the saint, sharing what everyone can have?

Fourth, think about what happens when the story goes wrong. Remember the hero is always at the centre of the story. Remember it's the hero's decisive intervention that makes the story come out right. Without the hero all would be lost. So if the hero makes a mistake, if the hero bungles, or exposes a serious flaw – it's a disaster, a catastrophe, probably fatal for the story and, if it's a big story, possibly pretty serious for life as we know it. By contrast the saint expects to fail. If the saint's failures are honest ones, they merely highlight the wonder of God's greater victory. If the saint's failures are less admirable ones, they open out the cycle of repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation and restoration that Christians call a new creation. A hero fears failure, flees mistakes, and knows no repentance: the

saint knows there's a crack in everything – that's how the light gets in. Think about the stories you tell about yourself. Are you succeeding in the hero's story, the one that will finally fail? Or are you failing in the saint's story, the one that will finally succeed?

And finally, the hero stands alone against the world. The story of the hero shows how he or she stands out from their community, by the excellence of their virtue, the decisiveness of their intervention, or their simple right to have a story told about them. The story of God tells how Jesus expects a response from his disciples that they cannot give on their own: they depend not only on him but on one another for resources that can sustain faithful lives, and they discover that their dependence on one another isn't a handicap to but is central to their witness. Here's the crucial point. Of those 64 references to saints in the New Testament, every single one is in the plural. Saints are never alone. They assume, demand, require community – a special kind of community that we call the Communion of Saints. Heroes have learnt to depend on themselves: saints learn to depend on God and on the community of faith. The Church is God's new language, and it speaks not of a country fit for heroes to live in but of a commonwealth of saints.

So there's a message for all of us here this morning. The message is simple, painful, universal, and liberating. Remember the story is not about you; it is about God. You're called not to be successful, but to be faithful. The things in life that God wants to give you are not in short supply. Your mistakes will speak of God more than will your achievements. And if you're faithful, you are never alone. Here's the final question for you, a question to reflect on today and this week and maybe beyond: might it be time for you to stop trying so hard to be a hero, and begin to let God make you into a saint?