What Makes a Saint?

Our common understanding of the word “saint” is someone whom the Church has canonised, thereby declaring that they are in heaven. But St Paul wrote to the Corinthians and called them saints. The word “saint” (from the Latin sancti) means “holy”, and at our baptism we become holy, so we become saints. However, we are imperfect saints, and it is a lifelong journey to reach the fullness of sanctity, which is only finally achieved in heaven.

So how do we get there? By simply accepting a sermon Jesus gave over two thousand years ago: the “Sermon on the Mount”, sometimes called the “greatest sermon of all time”, which begins with a list of revolutionary statements we now know as the “Beatitudes”. The Beatitudes give us a blueprint for living our lives and a key to entering the Kingdom of God.

We are told to be poor in spirit, which means being humble: the opposite of pride, which puts ourselves first. We should be meek, always seeking to serve rather than seeking the power to lord it over others. We are told to hunger for righteousness, never tolerating injustice and always having the integrity to suffer for what we believe in, if need be. We should be merciful, not only towards those we feel deserve mercy, such as the poor and the disadvantaged, but also towards those who need our forgiveness and consideration. Are we always pure of heart, or do we enjoy a good gossip or a joke at someone else’s expense? Are we peacemakers, or do we fuel battles against neighbours, workmates or people from different communities?

The Beatitudes are a list of challenges designed to shape our lives for the better, but are we left looking at the list and feeling that it is just too tall an order? As with anything that initially seems too difficult, are we in danger of simply “switching off”, imagining

that Jesus' ideals are meant for others but not for us?

On this, the Feast of All Saints, we celebrate the lives not only of the formally canonised saints but also of the many ordinary people, including those in our family, who did their best to live according to God's commandments. A saint is not necessarily a perfect person, but someone who has tried their hardest to be faithful to God. When we determine to live our lives by Jesus' ideals, what matters is our commitment and integrity, not our measure of success.