

ALL SAINTS' SUNDAY, 2013

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Baptism of Dillon Diabah

(Daniel 7.1-3, 15-18; Luke 6.20-31)

Jesus looked up at his disciples and said: "Do to others as you would have them do to you".

Today is a doubly special day: in a moment we will be celebrating the baptism of Dillon Diabah; and what better day to be welcomed into the community of Christ than All Saints Day – the day when we give thanks, not just for the mega-stars of the Christian galaxy, people like Mary, and Peter and Paul, and Francis of Assisi, but also for all the 'little saints': people whose lives may only have been known to God and their neighbours; people whose names will never feature in the history books; but people who, in their own day, loved God, and cared for other people; whose lives brought blessing to those they met.

One of the things I love about the baptism of a baby is the way it focuses our attention on this tiny little person. God is such an amazing fount of creativity. Like the snowflakes, God makes each of us different. In the whole history of the world, there never has been another Dillon; and it does not matter how long life on earth continues, there never will be another Dillon. God has ensured that, genetically, Dillon is unique.

This means that Dillon – although he will experience all the normal ups and downs of life – will inhabit this world in a way that no one else can. From a Christian point of view, it is as if God has entrusted him with an unrepeatable portion of creation that only he can inhabit, enjoy, and bring into relationship with God. This will be Dillon's vocation, just as it is your's and mine. Each of us has an opportunity, a task to complete for God that no one else can do, and the Kingdom of Christ will be the poorer if your contribution or mine is lacking from the whole.

Dillon is just starting out on life. On All Saints' Day we see how the unique individuality of each one of us can be brought to completion within the providence of God. What is it that makes a saint? I guess that, almost by definition, saints are good. But this tells us very little. They may have put Jesus' teaching into practice – that we should treat others as we would like them to treat us – but this is general teaching. What would a saint look like if we met one in the flesh?

Impressed, as I am, by the uniqueness of every human being, I would want to say that a saint is a person who has lived the life God gave them to the full. Saints are not Jesus clones – they do not all wear sandals and long white robes. Rather, they have become, as fully as is possible in this life, the unique person God created each of them to be – and yet, in and through their uniqueness, the life and light of Christ are refracted in a way that allows God's glory to shine more fully in the world.

These ideas received most wonderful expression in one of the sonnets of Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Victorian priest and poet. Hopkins was a rare and individual genius who suffered much, during his comparatively short life, from the fact most of his friends and confreres were unable to comprehend his unique poetic gift. It was only after his death, in his mid forties, that the religious and literary worlds began to wake up to the fact that he had been a major British poet.

In this poem, Hopkins celebrates the absolutely unique capacity of every creature, thing and person to be exactly what it is – be it a kingfisher, a dragonfly, a stone falling into a well, a church bell swinging in its frame, or a human being. Then, looking beyond all the individual differences, Hopkins sees the presence of Christ, God's creative Word, 'playing' – and I love that word 'playing' – to the glory of the Father through the features of our faces. As a Jesuit priest, Hopkins had deeply internalised the teaching of his Society's founder, Ignatius of Loyola, who taught that we should be able to find God in all things; maybe this is his word to us, today. The poem goes like this,

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves — goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came.*

I say móre: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: thát keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is —
Chríst — for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

As we bring Dillon to the font today, let us pray that, through his life – be it long or short – Christ will be seen to play, and to play in such a way that the presence, love, and reality of God will be made more real for those he meets. And as we make this prayer for Dillon, let us give thanks for all those Christian people – both the great saints, and those known only to a few – in whom the light of Christ has shone. May we gain confidence and courage from their example to live our own lives to the full.