

FOR ALL THE SAINTS¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on Sunday 3 November 2024, being the celebration of the Feast of All Saints

I like the feast of All Saints, particularly, but not only, for its processional hymn “For all the Saints” and its tune ‘Sine Nomine’² by Vaughan Williams with its attention-grabbing opening G. Nevertheless, I have always had some confusion between All Saints and All Souls, which we celebrated last evening with Faure’s “Requiem”. My confusion arises from a dual meaning of the word “saint”. Matthew’s gospel calls the faithful of pre-Christian times by that name when he records the graves being thrown open when Jesus died.³ In his letters, Paul speaks of the members of the early Christian communities as “saints”. It might follow from this that both celebrations are about saints.

Let’s quickly sort this out. The Feast of All Saints has its origin in about the 4th century, most probably as a celebration of martyrs, those who had paid for their faith with their lives.⁴ It reflects the deep bond believed to exist between the earthly church and the heavenly church, both of which are one. These are the “great cloud of witnesses” mentioned in Hebrews.⁵ As that text says, we are to be encouraged by their faith.

The Feast of All Souls was initially an opportunity to pray for the souls of those in purgatory.⁶ This is why it became customary to celebrate the day with a requiem mass. At the Reformation, however, the Church of England dropped the doctrine of purgatory and, with it, the Feast of All Souls. Its revival arose from the Oxford Movement, but its wider acceptance may have been related to the massive loss of life in World War I and the need to mourn those losses.

For our present purposes, we may draw the distinction in this way. The Feast of All Souls relates to our personal remembrance of the departed, which is why we have an “Obit Book”. The Feast of All Saints relates to our celebration of our exemplars, whose example we are encouraged to follow.

In today’s celebration, I want to refer to five Saints, none of whom have been through any formal canonisation ceremony. The first three are found in our gospel reading: Mary, Martha and Lazarus of Bethany. We know the two sisters from Luke’s gospel where he records them welcoming Jesus into their home. Mary sits at the feet of Jesus, while Martha complains about being distracted by doing all the work for their guest. There is no mention of their brother, Lazarus.⁷ John’s gospel identifies their village as Bethany on the other side of the Mount of Olives from Jerusalem.⁸ Later, in John 12, Mary anoints the feet of Jesus with costly ointment. Today’s reading is about the death and raising of Lazarus.

¹ Readings: Wisdom 3:1-9; Psalm 24; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44

² *New English Hymnal* 197

³ Matthew 27:52

⁴ [All Saints' Day - Wikipedia](#)

⁵ Hebrews 12:1

⁶ [All Souls' Day - Wikipedia](#)

⁷ Luke 10:38-42

⁸ John 11

If I may say so, there is something a little odd about this family. None of the three is married. Marriage was not only customary; it was required. Women needed to be married to secure their existence when their parents died. Men needed children to continue their name. Also, Mary, and, by implication the family, was financially secure, given that the ointment on Jesus' feet was very expensive.

What we do know is that Jesus was very close to this family. That Jesus wept when he saw the tomb of Lazarus, is a mark both of that love and of his suffering with those he loved. This is a real moment and one redolent of the theological centre of the Christian faith.

My next saint is memorialised on the south wall just east of the chapel: Bishop John Coleridge Patteson.⁹ Born in 1827, Patteson was martyred in the Solomon Islands on 21 September 1871. Ordained priest in 1854, he was recruited by George Augustus Selwyn (1809-1878), the first bishop of New Zealand, which then included Melanesia.¹⁰ Selwyn consecrated Patteson as the first bishop of Melanesia on 24 February 1861. His death is believed to be an act of retribution for the activities of "blackbirders" who recruited Melanesians into *de facto* slavery in Australian sugar cane fields. Sometimes they negotiated so-called contracts with Melanesian men, at other times, they just kidnapped them. Patteson actively campaigned against blackbirders. Islanders naturally resented the taking of their young men.

From another perspective, Patteson also took young men from their islands, originally to St Barnabas College on Norfolk Island, where they were educated and then returned to be leaders. It is not that he sought to make them British, but he wanted to equip them for the new world that he could see was coming. Amongst other things, he taught them to play cricket. Nevertheless, the islanders wanted their young men at home, regardless of where they went and may not have drawn any distinction between blackbirders and missionaries. Thus, colonialism and missionaries were inextricably linked.

Patteson's patron, Selwyn, developed a specifically "high church" style of mission, which, in an urban version, proved influential in the history of St James', marking it off from the evangelical stance of the Sydney diocese. Patteson, in his visits to Sydney, was a vehicle of Selwyn's mission concept, which was also taken up by the now Anglican Board of Mission.

Patteson never married but his fame was secured by being part of the British establishment. His novelist cousin, Charlotte Yonge, wrote a biography shortly after his death, raising him to the status of hero.¹¹ If you visit Christ Church St Laurence, you will see his almost sepulchral memorial raised by public subscription.¹²

I turn now to a modern saint, the recently deceased Robert Willis,¹³ at his death on 22 October 2024, Dean Emeritus of Canterbury and resident fellow at Berkeley Divinity School at Yale University. We are now remembering him in our intercessions. Born in 1947, Willis was ordained deacon in 1972 and priest in 1973. At one time, he was team rector of Tisbury in Wiltshire, where our former rector, Bishop Richard Hurford, had also served. In 1992, he was made Dean of Hereford and, in 2001 the 39th Dean of Canterbury since the Reformation.

⁹ [John Patteson \(bishop\) - Wikipedia](#) and [Biography - John Coleridge Patteson - Australian Dictionary of Biography \(anu.edu.au\)](#)

¹⁰ [George Selwyn \(bishop of Lichfield\) - Wikipedia](#)

¹¹ [Life of John Coleridge Patteson, by Charlotte M. Yonge](#)

¹² [John Coleridge Patteson | Monument Australia](#)

¹³ [Robert Willis \(priest\) - Wikipedia](#)

Willis became an international figure during the COVID-19 pandemic when he began to say Morning Prayer from the Canterbury deanery garden, accompanied by his cats, Leo and Tiger. The sessions, over 900, were filmed by his partner, Fletcher Banner,¹⁴ and broadcast on YouTube, where they can still be viewed.¹⁵ I know that members of this congregation were regular viewers, valuing his deep spirituality and insights. He was an accomplished hymn writer and musician.

I have taken some pains to identify why my five saints might have deserved the status that I have ascribed to them. I have also noted how, in one way or another, they sit ambiguously in the history of their times. The family in Bethany seem out of place in their social context, apparently not married and living without any extended family that we know. They befriended the travelling rabbi with some cost to themselves, Mary with an extravagant and showy display of affection, Martha with some complaining and Lazarus with threats to his life after his raising. Not your ordinary first century Jewish family.

Patteson sits unhappily in the troubled world of 19th century English Christian missions. His intentions were entirely honourable, but he was a man of his times and may, in today's thinking have been a colonial instrument.

Described as well-spoken, scholarly, urbane, of great faith and intellect, Willis was in a registered same sex civil partnership for the last 20 years of his life, placing him at the centre of the schism in today's Anglican communion. I think that he would not have been permitted to stand in this pulpit.

As he did for Lazarus, Jesus would have wept for each of them in turn and would have shared their sorrows and griefs. He would also have rejoiced in their love for him, however expressed, and will have welcomed them into the cloud of witnesses that surround us.

For all the saints who from their labours rest,
who Thee by faith before the world confessed;
Thy name, O Jesu, be forever blest.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

¹⁴ [Banner Bio — Anglican Pilgrim Centre in Santiago](#)

¹⁵ [dean robert willis garden congregation - YouTube](#)



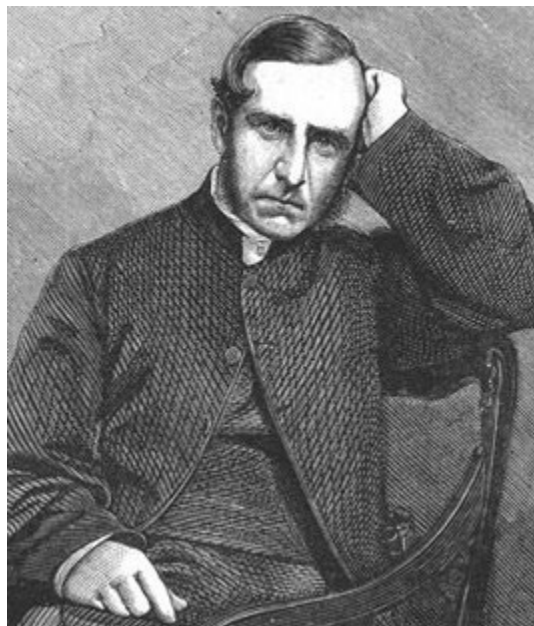
All Saints Day



All Souls Day



Mary, Martha and Lazarus



John Coleridge Patteson



Robert Willis