

When I was at theological college we would look to facing challenges in parish ministry and consider that the way forward would be to ask ourselves, only partly joking, "What would Father Jeremy do?" Father Jeremy was our college principal, a rotund and saintly figure who had been a much-loved parish priest in his time. Many of his students modelled their ministry on what they learned from Father Jeremy.

I still recall Father Jeremy's advice when I prepare for a funeral or fill in the service registers.

Perhaps there is someone in your life who has influenced you strongly. A grandparent or friend, or a heroic figure from politics or history. They don't even need to be real, many a teenager has modelled their behaviour on Jo March, from the novel *Little Women*, and many children longed to be Danny the Champion of the World, or Luke Skywalker.

For much of Christian history, the saints have been those sort of figures, people that one could turn to for friendship, inspiration and protection, "invisible companions" who because of their closeness to Christ in heaven could provide all sorts of comfort, as well as models for Christian discipleship.

Christians were unusual in honouring their dead and visiting their graves, most people in late Antiquity shunned burial places and kept away from the dead. But Christians believed that their sisters and brothers were already closer to Christ in death than in life, and the holier their lives, the closer they would be to Christ in death. By the Third Century, the burial places of the saints, those recognised to have been holy in their lives, were themselves thought to be especially holy places.

As the tomb and the altar became linked both physical space and spiritual understanding, bishops would perform public worship in close proximity to the dead. And a clever bishop might transfer relics from a tomb to a place inside a church that could become a focus for the cult.

Our Cathedral follows that pattern as we assume that the early Abbots were buried close to the East End altars.

Around the Christian world local cults built up, fostering a sense of local identity, while others grew an international following and so pilgrimage routes across Europe were born.

Children were named after the saints in the hope that they would benefit from special patronage in heaven, or display the characteristics of their namesake.

That's why stories of the saints started to become important. Knowing about the saint's life and death, enables closer imitation of their character, and helps to recruit them to your cause as a butcher, a baker or soldier. By the way, those saints would be St Luke, St Nicholas, and St Martin of Tours. If you want a woman patron saint you could chose Cecelia, patron of musicians, Gertrude of Nivelles, patron of cats, or Clare of Assisi, patron of both laundry workers and the television (ask me why afterwards!)

One of the best known collections of such stories was the Italian publication known as the Golden Legend, first written in the mid-13th century and among the earliest printed books, Caxton published an English version in 1483.

One of the features of the Golden Legend is the way that it makes the saints seem real and vivid to its readers (or more likely, listening audience).

In its pages, the past is not a foreign country, and they do not do things differently there. In its many illustrated versions, alien lands look just like home, and everyone wears medieval costume. These are saints who move and talk and act like the men and women anyone might see passing by their windows on the road to heaven.

These stories of saints are a reminder that stories are a way in which we not only explain ourselves, but understand who we are as individuals, communities and nations. Stories, narratives, are central to our identity as Christians, they are the way that we structure experience and align it to our beliefs. They are the framework that we use to explain our place in the world.

Some of the stories that frame us are public and shared, such as the stories of the Bible; stories of creation, salvation and promise. Some of our stories are more local; such as the stories that we tell about this building and its history, the stories of St Augustine and St Jordan, the story of monastic life or the story of the Bristol blitz. And some stories are more personal, the story of your family, the story of your struggles or sorrows, the story of

your relationship with God. Yet, each of these stories shapes who you are, your sense of belonging, your faith, your values.

However we understand the cult of the saints, their stories are a gift to us. Just as in the past, they are stories that can help to shape our Christian lives and discipleship.

In his Church Times column a couple of weeks ago, the poet Malcolm Guite wrote about how he has come to use the example of St Francis to help him overcome his natural selfishness and arrogance, by stopping from time to time to ask “what would St Francis do?”. He explains how this helps him to tap into a deeper place of humility, of love for others, and of appreciation of the natural world – the qualities that he has learned from the stories of St Francis.

The church of St Martin in the Fields in Trafalgar Square has, in the past ten years or so, connected deeply with the stories of St Martin of Tours, most particularly the one that tells how the soldier ripped his cloak in half to provide for the needs of a poor beggar. St Martin’s has a significant vocation as a place that provides for the needs of the poor and homeless in central London. And the church’s logo is a simple square, with two frayed edges, like those of a torn piece of cloth. St Martin’s story has become the community’s story.

In his Advent study session Canon Neil will be exploring the stories of our local patrons, St Augustine and St Jordan. Perhaps you might find there a story that will inspire you.

Wherever you find your stories, may we give thanks for the saints, for our companionship with them in the shared endeavour of Christian living, which has its source in the Spirit, poured out through the ages and proclaiming the gospel afresh in our own day.