

It pays to learn your saints. Not literally pays, in money terms, obviously, otherwise I'd probably be the richest person in this room rather than residing somewhere close to the bottom of the magic money tree. So not financially, but in all sorts of other ways, it pays to know your saints.

For example. When some busybody from the Church Historical Mediaeval Georgian Victorian don't-you-dare-touch-that-pew Preservation society makes an inventory of your church and writes down 'Stained glass window with unknown saint' on their clipboard, you can experience the temporary warm glow of superiority that comes from saying 'looks like St Martin to me. Soldier. Bishop. Cloak. Pretty obvious, meh.' That fleeting frisson of one upmanship will only last till they give the lightbulbs a grade I\* listing in revenge, but it's probably worth it. I suspect a previous run in is why our churchyard wall is a listed building.

That application of knowing your saints would only really be useful when dealing with obsessively churchy people, not you might think of much use to you in the pew. But what if religion came up in the pub quiz? Know your saints and you can astound - I think that's the right word- astound your pals with your knowledge of sacred trivia. And after that, if they haven't made their excuses, unfriended you on Facebook, muted you on Twitter and blocked you on Whatsapp you can take them to a random church- hopefully one where the puritans haven't been having their way with the windows- and complete the job of your social isolation. By displaying your erudition when confronted with a stained glass window showing a man dressed in a pink sack, with a dogs nose and holding a sink plunger. 'Aha,' you will cry triumphantly 'that's saint Ethelquentinrick' third under steward of Mercia who miraculously resisted the onslaughts of the devil who tempted him in the form of a mouldering ham roll. He's the patron saint of sandwich makers.

So, you too can feel superior to ecclesiastical busybodies and at the same time turn your friends into acquaintances. It pays to learn your saints.

Most importantly, and more seriously, the saints are your friends and your helpers. You may have noticed that Saints have their patronages. Probably this is best known when they take a country under their wing- so George is patron saint of England (and Portugal and Georgia)- but there is so much more to patron saints. Indeed, there is scarcely an area of human endeavour or experience that is not watched over with particular interest from a particular corner of heaven. And patronages are not costume jewellery, brilliant bling, prayerful paste for the pious, symbolic heavenly gongs doled out for good behaviour on earth: they are practical. If you're a patron saint, you're suppose to *do* something for those down below: certainly something more useful than striking holy poses and polishing your halo.

So if down on earth you're having trouble with your pigs, your cows or your lambs, call respectively on St Anthony, St Perpetua or the saint for today St John the Baptist. Ask for their prayers, they put in a word with the boss, problem- hopefully- solved. Simple. If that's a bit too agricultural, for city dwellers St Frances of Rome is know

to keep your driving safe (possibly she's never looks at the roads in her home town), St Michael will watch out for you at the supermarket (though there may be an argument with Frances about finding a space in the car park) and Saint Expedite is always on hand with his patronage for the impatient. Should your trip to ASDA become all too much, Wenceslas is the patron saint of brewers, Julian looks out for publicans and Bibiana deals with hangovers.

All ecclesiastically approved areas are covered by a particular saint, so know your saints and, in theory at least, it'll be like having a mate with a medical degree who knows how to fix cars, ice cakes, empty dishwashers, darn socks and fill in an almost successful Home Office visa application. Almost successful, obviously, as nobody can do the impossible. Such as get anyone in Sutton Council to take responsibility for painting double yellow lines.

Some patron saints will be kept busier than others: there is clearly permanent hotline from No 10 to St Jude, patrons saint of lost causes, and St Sithney, patron of mad dogs is no doubt frantic much of the year and especially during the December Christmas shopping bonanza and when parliament sits.

The easiest work for a patron saint, however, must be that of St Zita. She's been lying motionless in Lucca cathedral since she died in 1272: visit her Tuscan town and you can still see her reclining in her glass coffin. A saint's work is spiritual not corporal of course, but like her incorrupt body being a symbol of her saintliness, so her observable lack of activity is a symbol of the saintly sinecure she's been allotted. Because St Zita is the patron saint of those who have lost their keys.

Car keys, house keys, church keys, safe keys: where's my keys you cry? After half an hour's increasingly frantic panic stricken searching- on every surface, in every room, under the bed, behind the sofa, in the dog basket and the recycling bin- when all your efforts are exhausted and your exasperation at boiling point there is nothing left but to implore the intercession of St Zita. And her job is so easy she doesn't have to lift a finger, she certainly doesn't have to pass the request on to her line manager. Without batting an eyelid Zita's response is always the same. Lost keys? They're in your pocket where you put them an hour ago.

You thought it was only you.

To be fair, Zita is also the patron saint of maidservants, but with the demise of domestic service, even there her duties are light, so in the name of saintly productivity I thought we might suggest another patronage Zita could add to her portfolio. I would like to suggest, based on her sterling lost key work, she become the patron saint of Advent.

There are other contenders of course. Nicholas, although his feast is tomorrow, when he puts on his red coat and starts going Ho Ho Ho is really the Christmas

saint. John the Baptist turns up a lot in the gospels at the moment but he's a bit unpredictable and too scary to really take to your heart. Zita, though is the perfect Advent candidate because her work with lost keys has given her plenty of experience in the central message of this season: It's in front of your face. It's been there all along.

In church in Advent it very often feels like we're celebrating something in the past-Christmas- and looking forward (with much less enthusiasm) to something in the future- the second coming; doing the temporal splits, one foot in the past, one foot in the future. That's not so: everything Advent is about, it's about right now.

Academic theologians love long words- it makes all their talk about sky fairies seem scientific and serious. And the best jargon for what Advent is about for Christians is what the theologians call 'realised eschatology.' Drop that into your conversation and any remaining friends will make their excuses. 'Eschatology' means the end times, 'realised' means, it's already happening. If you want to fit that all on a sandwich board it's not 'the end is nigh' it's 'the end has begun'.

'The Kingdom of heaven has come near' is John the Baptist's cry: later, 'the Kingdom of God is among you' is Jesus' teaching. The Kingdom of God is among you: straight in front of your eyes, right under your nose and in your face. We've been expectantly looking for the signs of the coming of the Kingdom, and we've been looking in the wrong place. It's not in the future. It's now. You were expecting it some time hence so you weren't paying too much attention. And whaddaya know? It's been right there all along.

Of course it's tempting to push the reckoning back to a later date, but you know, none of us had noticed: it's already under way. Time is short. I know it feels like you have all the time in the world. Well, you have all the time in your world, but like the spending power of the money in your pocket, every day it gets a little bit less, and one day it will be gone. One day you will blink and this world will be gone and you will be in the next. That process has started already. Here and now, the afterlife in this life.

There has never been a better time, there is no time like the present; there is no time like now. Don't wait for the Kingdom come: work for the Kingdom, now.