All Saints

Undergoing initial training as a Naval Officer or Chaplain at Dartmouth involves enduring an exercise on nearby Dartmoor, one which can be challenging and miserable but, at times, exhilarating.

We would spend several days on the moor, living on ration packs carried in rucksacks heavy with spare clothing and other kit, trekking for miles over rough terrain in fatigues and combat boots, guided by experienced Naval officers and stalked by Royal Marines whose task it was to make life even more difficult than it was already.

Of all the rigours of the moor, the worst was sleep deprivation. We might be allowed an hour's kip, huddled together with only a tarpaulin sheet to protect us from the elements before our green bereted torturers would throw firecrackers, giving us a rude awakening and forcing us to get up and march again.

Keeping our clothes dry was a real trial, not helped when the marines made us sit waist deep in the freezing River Dart in the middle of the night to test our resilience and our ability to dry clothes in the autumn mists of the moor.

It was surreal having a colour sergeant run his hand over the stubble on your face at 4 o'clock in the morning, testing to see if you'd had a close enough shave in the river water in the dark with no mirror. The fact that we were exhausted, freezing and miles from civilisation was, of course, no excuse for a decline in standards.

In later years, as Chaplain to the College, I'd head up to the moors for a couple of days. As a member of the College staff I could now overnight in a warm and dry scout hut with those same marines who, it turned out, were human after all.

I'd take a rucksack full of mars bars – one for each of the cadets. Whatever the Chaplain handed out was the only sustenance they were allowed outside of their ration packs. There could be over a hundred cadets scattered across the moor in groups of ten, and much of the day I would spend tracking them down, finding the occasional moment between the exhausting marches and gruelling leadership exercises, just to find out how they were doing and give them a chance to talk, particularly those the staff were concerned about. Often, what they needed most wasn't advice or encouragement, but simply someone prepared to listen.

They were inevitably cold, wet, tired and hungry and, sometimes, a group would ask me to say a prayer with them. There's nothing like being pushed to our outer limits to make us appreciate the value of prayer, and a mars bar.

During the breaks, they'd take out a small stove to make some tea but, often, their fingers were too frozen to light the little tablet of paraffin which heated the water. At first, I'd help them by lighting the tablet with a match, but the winds on Dartmoor are so strong that, unless we were in a very sheltered spot, the matches would blow out before they could light the stove so I started taking a cook's blowtorch and, when the Marines' backs were turned, I could instantly blow their paraffin tablets into flames.

I've often thought that's how Our Lady and the saints work in our lives. When our little flame of faith is flickering in the storms of life, when the burdens we carry threaten to overwhelm us, the memory of the saints along with their example and their prayers can help rekindle within us the fire of God's love. Of course, the saints do not shine with a light of their own. They channel the light of Christ, which even the deepest darkness cannot extinguish.

And perhaps the first thing to remember on this feast of All Saints is that the saints knew what it was to be cold, tired and discouraged themselves. We tend to meet them in stained glass or as statues, beautifully dressed, hands joined, eyes raised serenely towards heaven.

We see them here in St Patrick, St Theresa of Avila and St Robert in the sanctuary windows alongside St Michael and our patroness Our Lady Immaculate, and St Robert again up there. It can be difficult to imagine them losing their patience or struggling to pray or feeling they lacked the strength to carry on.

But there's a stark reality to the lives of the people behind the windows and statues that adorn our churches. Many of them knew disappointment and temptation and certainly suffering. Some of them even felt distant from heaven. St John of the Cross famously endured a profound 'dark night of the soul'.

Even Mother Teresa, who brought the light of Christ to the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, spent decades struggling with an agonising sense that God was absent from her life. As a young man, Pope St John Paul II suffered the brutality of Nazi occupation. Later in life, having survived an assassin's bullet, he endured the slow humiliation of physical decline. Sanctity comes not through the absence of suffering, but in the way it's carried, in refusing to let darkness extinguish the light of our faith.

Other saints carried deep regrets. St Augustine's Confessions reveal a man painfully conscious of the sins and follies of his youth. Having sought God in all the wrong places he discovered that holiness begins not with being perfect, but with allowing ourselves to be moulded by God and transformed by His mercy.

That's why the Gospel we hear today is so important. In the Beatitudes, Jesus gives us a blueprint for holiness – it's merciful, it seeks peace, always strives for justice. These are not qualities reserved to people who spend their lives on their knees in prayer. They are forged in kitchens and workplaces, on hospital wards and in family homes, evident in the small and difficult choices that nobody else notices. Sometimes, of course, those choices demand extraordinary courage.

We might recall St Maximilian Kolbe, the Polish Franciscan priest imprisoned in Auschwitz, who stepped forward to take the place of a fellow prisoner condemned to death. His example shone brightly in a place designed to extinguish every trace of human dignity and compassion, his actions straight from the pages of John – 'greater love has no one than this – that they lay down their life for their friends'.

But the Beatitudes are more often lived out in the quiet choices of everyday life. Mercy takes shape when we have been hurt but decide to forgive. Peacemaking begins when we could repeat words of scandal but choose to let them die with us. Faithfulness grows when someone needs our care and even though we're tired we give it to them anyway. It's there when prayer feels empty but, still, we turn to God anyway.

For those young cadets, even getting a stove alight was beyond them. They needed someone whose hands were warmer, whose strength was not exhausted, someone who had endured similar hardships and survived.

There are times when faith is like that. We need the company of people whose strength can help us take the next step. Some are the people who sit beside us now. Others have completed their earthly journey and live in God's presence, united with us in the communion of saints. Death cannot sever our bond with them.

So, today we celebrate not just the names which appear in the Church's calendar, their figures immortalised in stained glass or statues. We celebrate, too, that great multitude whose holiness was ordinary and subtle. The parents who made our home a place of safety. The grandparents whose wisdom and affection kept us on the right track. The friend who stuck by us when others would have walked away.

St Thérèse of Lisieux understood the holiness of ordinary people better than most. Her 'little way' was to do the smallest things with extraordinary love, recognising that holiness is found most often in the countless acts of kindness, patience and forgiveness that make up an ordinary life.

And perhaps this is the most encouraging thing about this feast - holiness is possible here, in the circumstances in which we live right now – in the choices we make today.

Some of those young cadets on Dartmoor are now senior officers, commanding ships and submarines. In later years, when our paths crossed in the Fleet, they would sometimes remember the prayers said on the moor, but they would always remember the Mars bar and the cook's blowtorch.

Because, for those less familiar with faith, the words of a prayer may fade from memory, but the kindness which personifies that prayer can leave an impression that lasts a lifetime. It's said that people may forget what we say, they may even forget what we do, but they never forget how we made them feel.

Hopefully, the care those cadets received throughout the rigours of their training helped them, in turn, to show generosity and compassion towards those who later served under their command.

And this is how holiness spreads. The light that others kindle in us in turn has the power to drive away the darkness of the world. But we must be sure that it is truly God's light we're sharing, and not the harsh glare of our own pride and certainty. True light illuminates - it warms and guides. But glare dazzles, it causes confusion, disorientation and even blindness.

The greatest danger is that, in being determined to defend what we believe to be true, we lose sight of the love which gives that truth its meaning. St Paul knew this. He said, 'Even if we have faith enough to move mountains, without love we are nothing.'
On this feast day we give thanks for the many saints who have gone before us - those enshrined in windows and statues, but also those ordinary people whose character, kindness and example are woven into the tapestry of our own lives. Their names may never appear in the Church's calendar, but their goodness has left its mark upon us.

And perhaps the greatest tribute we can pay them is to allow that same goodness to take root in our own lives. It may feel, sometimes, that we only have a little match to help rekindle someone's faltering faith, to bring warmth to a life grown cold through suffering, unbelief or disillusionment. But the saints remind us that, when we open ourselves fully to the grace of God, that little flame can become something altogether more powerful. We may only have matches, but Our Lady and the saints - they have the blowtorch, whose flame is the love of Christ.

And perhaps that is what this feast is really asking of us. Not that we should become extraordinary people, but that we should allow God's extraordinary love to shine through the ordinary circumstances of our lives. So that when someone else is struggling to keep their flame of faith alight, we might be the ones who help them find the warmth and light they need to carry on.