

It's one of the most popular hymns in the Episcopal Church:  
*I sing a song of the saints of God,  
 patient and brave and true,  
 who toiled and fought and lived and died  
 for the Lord they loved and knew.*

{We will sing this hymn at our 10:30 service this morning.} 8:00  
 {We just sang this hymn a few moments ago.} 10:30

It's especially appropriate for our celebration of All Saints Day, the day when we remember all the saints, all of the faithful departed, known and unknown, famous and obscure.

The hymn has rather humble origins. It was written almost a century ago by a British homemaker with the alliterative name of Lesbia Lesley Locket Scott. Mrs. Scott's husband would eventually become a priest in the Church of England. She wrote a number of hymns for her children to sing. *I sing a song of the saints of God* was not her favorite composition, nor was it her children's favorite. But it's the only one that has endured.

Ironically, "I sing a song of the saints of God" has never been popular in England and does not appear in the current English hymnal. But it found its way across the Atlantic. And yes, the third verse certainly contains all sorts of cultural references from 1920s rural English life: lanes and trains and shops and tea. Nevertheless, it's become a beloved hymn in America. It's #14 on the list of the 20 most popular hymns in the Episcopal Church.

In our church it first appeared in the 1940 hymnal under the section of "Hymns for Children." And if you have children in your life, there is a delightful children's book that illustrates this hymn with the title, *I Sing a Song of the Saints of God*.

In our current 1982 hymnal, it has become a hymn for adults, in fact it's listed under section, "Holy Days and Various Occasions" as a hymn for All Saints Day.

And in both of our Episcopal hymnals we've kept the original language:  
*You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea,  
 in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea,  
 for the saints of God are just folk like me,  
 and I mean to be one too.*

The Methodists, however, have tried to update these lines. Their version in their hymnal reads,

*You can meet them in school, on the street in the store,  
 in church, by the sea, in the house next door;  
 they are saints of God, whether rich or poor,  
 and I mean to be one too.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 1989

In this case, I think this update removes some of the sparkle and joy of the hymn. I prefer the original, even if I am unlikely to be found walking on English country lanes or at tea. Maybe that's a part of the charm of this hymn.

The first two verses of the hymn have a historical focus. We're remembering our ancestors in the faith. And the language is rather heroic.

Verse one uses the stalwart adjectives of "patient and brave and true."

And then we get the wonderful verbs: "(the saints) toiled and fought and lived and died for the Lord they loved and knew."

What a great line. What a great description: toiling, fighting, living and dying for Jesus, whom they loved and knew.

And the beginning of the second verse extends and expands these images:

*They loved their Lord so dear, so dear,  
and his love made them strong;  
and they followed the right, for Jesus' sake,  
the whole of their good lives long.  
Again, this is heroic language.*

They loved Jesus dearly, and were strengthened in turn by his love. And in that strength, they followed the right, they lived heroic lives of trying to do the right thing in response to Jesus' love and Jesus' teaching.

In all of these things, the saints are certainly worthy of emulation.

And then in both verses 1 and 2, we get some lists of specific saints:

*And one was a doctor, and one was a queen,  
and one was a shepherdess on the green...*

*And one was a soldier, and one was a priest,  
and one was slain by a fierce wild beast.*

As kids in chapel, we thought we were very clever, and we loved to surreptitiously reverse these lines:

*One was a beast, and one was slain by a fierce wild priest...*

In any event, what we have here in these verses is a listing of the saints coming from many different walks of life. And there are many saints who could fit into these categories. But apparently Mrs. Scott had particular saints in mind for each of these categories.

One was a doctor...

This is a reference to St. Luke, a companion of St. Paul, and the traditional author of the Gospel According to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. In Colossians, Paul refers to Luke

as "the beloved physician."<sup>2</sup> We don't know the details of Luke's status as a doctor, though the Gospel of Luke does contain some medical terminology that doesn't appear elsewhere in the New Testament. A couple of centuries later, the great church historian Eusebius describes Luke's books as "medicine for the soul."

Besides Luke, our calendar of saints has other physicians.

Three of the newest are Orthodox saints from the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century, the three female physicians Zenaida, Philonella, and Hermione. After being trained, they couldn't find jobs in a male-dominated profession. So they set up what were basically free clinics to care for people in Jesus' name.

1,000 years later, we have another female physician on our calendar, the multi-talented St. Hildegard of Bingen, who was not only a nun and abbess, but also a musician, a scientist, a playwright, and a medical practitioner.

In the US, there were physicians who were part of the group known on our calendar as the "Martyrs of Memphis." This was a group of Episcopal nuns, priests, and physicians, who stayed behind during the yellow fever epidemic in Memphis Tennessee in 1878. They ministered to the sick and the dying, and about half the group ended up dying of yellow fever themselves.

One was a queen...

There are number of saintly queens on our calendar of saints: Queen Bertha of Kent, Queen Emma of Hawaii, Empress Helena.

But the hymn is referring to St. Margaret, Queen of Scotland, and wife of King Malcolm III. Yes, if you're into Shakespeare, this is the Malcolm who succeeded the usurper Macbeth, who had killed Malcolm's father, Duncan. It was a brutal time. Yet, Queen Margaret sought to improve the conditions of her people, and built schools, hospitals, and orphanages. She tried to stop warfare between Scottish clans, even though she was unsuccessful in the long run. Nevertheless, she is a beloved saint in Scotland to this day.

One was a shepherdess...

We don't have a lot of shepherdesses on our calendar of saints. The reference here is to St. Joan of Arc. Joan was tending her parents' flocks of sheep when she began to have visions of St. Michael and St. Catherine amongst others. Joan was convinced that God was calling her to help end the civil war between a couple of French factions, one of whom was allied with the English. After being part of a number of victories, Joan was captured by the other side, and tried and executed as a heretic and a cross-dresser. But 25 years after her death, the pope ordered a posthumous retrial that found her innocent and declared her to be a holy martyr.

One was a soldier...

While Joan of Arc could have fit into this category as well, Mrs. Scott was thinking of St. Martin of Tours. Martin was a Roman soldier in the 4<sup>th</sup> century who became a Christian. He

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<sup>2</sup> Col 4:14

later became a monk and a bishop. The most famous story about Martin centers around a time when he was still a soldier. He met a scantily dressed beggar. Martin pulled out his sword and sliced his own soldier's cloak in half, giving half to the beggar. That night in a dream, Jesus appeared to Martin dressed in that half-cloak. He said, "Martin clothed me with this robe."

One was a priest...

There are an enormous number of priests and bishops and deacons on the calendar of saints. Mrs. Scott was thinking of John Donne. Donne was a priest in the Church of England and was most notably the dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London. But he is also renowned as a poet. His most famous works include the Sonnet<sup>3</sup> that begins, "Death be not proud," and ends with the triumphant statement of resurrection:

*One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,  
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.*

Perhaps his most famous line is excerpted from an essay<sup>4</sup>:

*No man is an island, entire of itself;  
every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main...  
any man's death diminishes me,  
because I am involved in mankind,  
and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;  
it tolls for thee.*

One was slain by a fierce wild beast...

Again, there were many Christians put to death in the arena who were slain by a veritable menagerie of fierce wild beasts. But Mrs. Scott is referring to St. Ignatius of Antioch. Ignatius was an important bishop in an important city in the Roman Empire. Antioch was a large city of 250,000 that sits on the modern-day border between Syria and Turkey. Ignatius was a disciple of the apostle John, and wrote 7 epistles that just missed the cut of being included in the New Testament.

In the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century, Bishop Ignatius was sentenced to death. But the Romans made a horrible strategic error. They decided to transport Ignatius from Syria to Rome for execution. They wanted to make an example of him at every stop along the way about what happens to Christians who oppose Rome. It backfired. At every stop, Ignatius encouraged the local Christians to persevere in the midst of persecution. The trip turned basically into a triumphant farewell tour, a glorious victory lap that strengthened the Christians in every city they visited. Eventually they did arrive in Rome. And there, Ignatius was killed in the Coliseum by being torn apart by lions.

A doctor, a queen, a shepherdess, a soldier, a priest, a martyr. There were all of them, saints of God, Mrs. Scott reminds us, examples for us to follow. And she repeatedly says that we should strive to emulate them, that we too should intend to live saintly lives:

*And I mean, God helping, to be one too.*

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<sup>3</sup> Holy Sonnet X

<sup>4</sup> Meditation XVII

And she reminds us, that the saints "lived not only in ages past." God's saints are still around us.

*You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea,  
in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea,  
for the saints of God are just folk like me,  
and I mean to be one too.*

And as followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to live into the examples of all of these saints who have gone before us. In a few moments, we will reexamine the job description of how we do that, when we renew our baptismal covenant. We will proclaim that we, too, strive to be God's saints, with God's help.

May God give us grace to follow all of his saints in faith and hope and love.