

Feast of All Saints Sunday 30th October 2016

Rev. 7: 9-17

Ps. 34

1 John 3:1-3

Gospel Matthew 5:1-12

Sermon given by Revd. Sarah Shaw

Blessed are those who know their need of God

Today we enter a season of Remembrance, starting today with the Feast of All Saints, when we remember all saints and martyrs through the ages, known and unknown. We continue on Wednesday with the Commemoration of the Faithful Departed, or All Souls, when we particularly remember those who we have loved and see no more. And of course this period culminates with Remembrance Sunday, when we remember and honour those who have died fighting for peace.

Remembrance is not simply an act of remembering and honouring those who have gone before us, however. It is more than that - for the same reason that our celebration of the Eucharist each week is not only a Commemoration of our Lord's Last Supper with his friends. In the Eucharistic prayer we pray this 'We recall his blessed passion and death, his glorious resurrection and ascension, and we look for the coming of his Kingdom.' The use of the word 'Recall' here is not only about remembering. It is about making something real in the present. Regardless of what we believe actually happens to us when we take the bread and the wine, we come to the table prepared to be transformed by a real encounter with the risen Christ. And because of that we are able to look for, and work for, the coming of his Kingdom.

In our commemoration of those who have died, whether today, or on All Souls, or on Remembrance Sunday, as well as properly honouring the dead, we should be prepared to be transformed - to be led into a deeper relationship with God. That's the ultimate point of all our worship. So – what can we learn today about God, and our relationship with him on this All Saints Sunday?

St John gives us an extraordinary vision of the heavenly Temple in our reading from Revelation. It's not an easy book, and many have puzzled the symbolism contained within it. But in the reading we've just heard what is striking is this – it is a 'great multitude' – beyond number, who stand before the throne of God worshipping him. And not only that, they come from all corners of the globe, from all tribes, peoples and languages. It sounds as if many – even most, will not look and sound and seem to be, like you and me. It is a reminder that there is no 'us' and 'them' in the Kingdom of God.

Those of you who were here last week would have heard the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee, both praying in the Temple. The Pharisee thanks God that he is not a sinner like the tax collector, whilst the tax collector won't even look up to heaven but simply throws himself on God's mercy. It's easy to be like the Pharisee, believing that we are the ones who are surely saved, and comparing ourselves to others, and believing them unworthy of God's grace. The reality is that the minute we think we're the only ones who've got it right and are righteous – Jesus is on the other side, with those who know their need of God.

The great multitude of Saints are simply that – those who know their need of God and now worship him night and day. And they are – and we too with them as members of the communion of saints – holy and righteous in God's sight. Not because of anything good they have done, and not because of anything good we have done, but simply through knowing our need of God. We go wrong when we think we don't need God, that we can achieve righteousness or goodness by ourselves. This is what Jesus is getting at in our Gospel reading when he says 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek'.

But how can this be? How can it be a good thing to be poor, to mourn, to be meek? These words meant something different to the ears of Jesus' followers than to us. To be 'poor' in this context, whether poor in resources or in spirit, means to be a person who puts their whole trust in God. This meaning appears in our Psalm today, too - 'Lo the poor crieth, and the Lord heareth him.' To mourn is to mourn the terrible things that happen to others – to break our own hearts for the things that break

God's heart. And to be 'meek' is to have that humility which recognizes our need of God.

Alright, we might say – but in what sense can suffering persecution ever be seen as a state of blessedness? We know that many believers through the centuries have, and do now, suffer all kinds of things for their faith. We may even in this country be thought of as strange, or mocked or insulted for standing out because of how we live our lives. Where is the blessedness in that?

The problem is, as it often is, I think, a linguistic one. Quite often people will say – me included – 'I feel blessed' – meaning that they feel happy, or that things have gone well, and in some way they attribute that to God. And indeed the Gospel of this world would say that those who have a comfortable, rich and peaceful life, those who are educated, well fed and well dressed, are the blessed ones. But it is a false Gospel. And it is one we have to guard against – especially in the Church. These are not signs of God's grace. Our blessedness lies elsewhere. The word 'Blessed' in the Greek is 'makarios', meaning divine, serene, irrepressible joy, untouchable and independent of the chances of this world. And it is not expressed by Jesus as a future hope – but in the imperative, as a reality now. 'Blessed *are* the poor!'

So why celebrate All Saints? To participate in the Communion of Saints, those who live in the Kingdom of heaven, worshipping God day and night – likewise, our true and final home. To declare that all are welcome – there is no barrier in the heavenly temple – to all who know their need of God. And finally to acknowledge *our* blessedness – as those who live lives supported *only* by trust in God, and in his providence.