

Sermon for 5 November 2023

All Saints Day

Revelation 7: 9 – end; 1 John 3: 1 – 3; Matthew 5: 1 -1 2 – Year A

In preparation for celebrating All Saints Day I've been having a bit of fun looking up the patron saints for some of the activities which are dear to our hearts here in St Michael's.

There is no patron saint of lawn bowls, but St. Sebastian is the patron saint of all athletics and athletes. So he will have to do for bowls. For gardening, which I think might include allotments we have St Fiacre. Or for serious agriculture it's St Isidore the Farmer. Patron Saint of golfers is St Andrew, because of his connection with St Andrews in Scotland – which I believe is hallowed ground for golfers. John Nepomuk is the patron saint of bridges, but I couldn't find a patron saint for bridge – or bridge players. Apart from St Andrew these are all relatively unknown saints. But I'm guessing a number of us – and not just

the choir – may know who is the patron saint of music ?? Saint Cecilia.

Joking apart – how do we respond to All Saints Day?

Our readings today give us two contrasting pictures to think about. We began with that wonderful picture from the Book of Revelation. Here we are transported to Heaven where there is a “great multitude.” So many that they are impossible to count. And a multinational and multilingual multitude. They're all standing close to the throne of God and of Jesus, the Lamb. They have the front spots at a huge praise party and they're shouting to God about what He has done for them. “Salvation belongs to our God...and to the Lamb.” These are the saints in heaven. Those who have overcome the trials and tests that they faced in life. They have “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” – they have trusted in Jesus above all else, even, for some, to the extent of suffering martyrdom. And Jesus' death on the Cross has

washed them clean from all their sin and gained them a place close to Him in Heaven. They are safe for ever. No more hunger or thirst, no scorching sun. No more tears. Just non-stop praise and worship. It's a wonderful encouraging vision. Something to look forward to.

And then we come back down to earth with the Beatitudes.

Because they're so familiar, it's perhaps difficult to really take them in. Jesus addresses these words to His disciples; to those who are serious about following Him, living their lives in His Way. One commentator has pointed out that the Beatitudes are essentially a self-portrait of Jesus. She says this:

“Jesus's contemporaries saw how he took the side of the excluded, the disreputable, the unimportant; how he comforted the sorrowful, and stood up for what is right; how gentle and kind he was, how open and honest; how compassionate he was to those in need or

distress; how his words brought peace to troubled hearts; how he forgave even those who hated him and wanted to kill him.”¹

So to take on board the Beatitudes, and to try to live by them, is to become like Jesus, to walk in His footsteps. Let's take them one by one -

To be poor in spirit – in other words to acknowledge our own brokenness and insufficiency, our complete dependence on God. Jesus, who was without sin, frequently acknowledged His complete dependence on God, his Father. This is also easier for those who are literally poor.

To mourn – probably more for the state of the world than for our own personal losses. Though we often experience God's blessing in times of personal loss.

To be humble – to quietly get on with doing God's work - when all the pressures around us tell us

¹ Sister Teresa in Church Times, *Embodying the Beatitudes*, page 21, 3 November 2023

that influence and celebrity – and having plenty of ‘likes’ on our social media accounts are what really matters

To hunger and thirst for righteousness – that is for God’s righteousness to prevail in the world. Perhaps literally to go hungry in order to follow a particular cause or path. Or perhaps we metaphorically hunger and thirst because we care so much about justice – and the lack of it.

To be merciful – seeing things as they are but not reacting judgementally, and forgiving.

To be pure in heart – or perhaps “unalloyed” might be a better translation – to be single-minded in our devotion to God.

To be peacemakers – Where others build walls, peacemakers painstakingly and slowly build bridges. I’m reminded of the moment when one of the few Israeli hostages to be released – an older woman, who is herself a long-time peacemaker – turned around to shake hands

with her captor as she left. It was a gesture that was noticed around the world.

Persecution - To accept that doing the right thing, and, in particular, being open about our faith in Jesus, may lay us open to ridicule, disbelief or even worse. It has always been this way, right since the prophets.

In 2016, at an ecumenical conference in Sweden, Pope Francis suggested six new Beatitudes for our time, building on the originals. Here they are:

Blessed are those who remain faithful while enduring evils inflicted on them by others, and forgive them from their heart.

Blessed are those who look into the eyes of the abandoned and marginalised, and show them their closeness.

Blessed are those who see God in every person, and strive to make others also discover him.

Blessed are those who protect and care for our common home.

Blessed are those who renounce their own comfort in order to help others.

Blessed are those who pray and work for full communion among Christians.²

As we celebrate All Saints Day we might ponder what it means for us, right now, to take the next step in following Jesus, becoming more like him. With all of the confusion and uncertainty around us in these times of rapid change, what is Christ's call to us? Which of the Beatitudes is the one that most resonates for us?

And at the same time we can be encouraged and look forward to our homecoming. To the day when we join the throng who worship before God's throne.

² Ibid

“Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen” (Revelation 7:12)

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