

All Saints' Tide Year A 2017

I am old-fashioned enough to delight in keeping the Feast of All Saints both on the day (which fell this year on Wednesday) but also on the Sunday within the Octave -as it used to be called– as we do today. The reason for this is not just to do with the fact that it is so engrained on my psyche having served as organist of two churches dedicated to All Saints (Falmouth and Hove), but for me it seems a festival bearing great riches and rewards for Christians on all sorts of levels. Traditionally, preachers will either concentrate on pointing worshippers to particular saints or just round the whole up in casting the saint 'net' over everyone. To some extent, both approaches are very laudable, and understandable when one considers the readings for today.

The Book of Revelation provides us with a stupendous vision of *'a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!'*

This wondrous vision focuses on the self-giving of the Lamb for humanity – the role of Jesus as Saviour – and John captures our imagination in language and the work of the mind's eye in providing a sense of our ultimate union with God, and the peace and serenity of that divine union – *'they will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'*

The Gospel reading seems almost down to earth in comparison – Matthew's Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount – familiar words, yet far more radical in nature than we give them credit for. If we say that the passage from Revelation reveals the multitude of saints gathered around the throne of God, then the Beatitudes represent a homely knowledge of the way in which all Christians, or indeed, all peoples may be gathered as one in the presence of God, by fulfilling the actions suggested: meekness, mercy, purity, and so on. However, I think that we can go even further.

Whilst Matthew paints the Beatitudes as a future consummation for humanity in God's fulfilment of love, I think that it is safe to say that they also point us to our life within the Kingdom of God in the here-and-now. What they are NOT are some sort of entrance exam to the Kingdom, a requirement of some impossible tick-list to carry out before we are let in. Rather they call us to consider every aspect of our lives and the way in which we may ourselves be signs of the Kingdom to the world we inhabit. The Beatitudes are about journeying with Christ in his Resurrection Life.

Sometimes travelling this path does indeed lead to persecution and revilement – we can point to many different situations around the world where Christians suffer physical persecution or even death because of their faith – now and every day. Within our own

society, there is an insidious undermining of Christianity and pouring of scorn on those who express their faith. The comments this week by presenters of Radio 4s 'Today' programme on 'Thought for the Day,' as a 'deeply, deeply boring slot' where Christians merely paint a picture of 'Jesus as a nice man' are insidious in nature and all too familiar. So too are things like the reporting on a recent survey about the collapse of Faith in our nation trumpeted recently. After all, 2,900 people were surveyed, and we can all trust polls, can't we!

Yes, the Church has much work to do in bridging the gap connecting with wider society and expectation. When I say 'Church' that means US. On a day when we celebrate All Saints in the fulness of faith, it is **you** and **I** who are called to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ in whatever way we can. We are not called to leave it to others or we really will be lost.

We have only to look at the lives of many young people to see that the Church – You and I – must bring light and hope into every area of society's life when we see the shallowness of living which leads to the tragedy of youth suicide and hopelessness on so many fronts, from drug use, image problems, depression and immorality, to the constant pursuit of the cult of self. Much within our society is broken, and the response to this brokenness on our part is Jesus Christ. Jesus is the answer. We are able to do this because although we are called to be saints, we know that we are flawed ourselves.

Forgive me for taking you to Cornwall - the county of my birth - but in Truro Cathedral there is a remarkable painting by the artist John Miller called 'Cornubia – Land of the Saints.' It was commissioned to celebrate the celebration of the centenary of the cathedral in 1980. Miller painted the county seen from the air, looking towards the south west with a wonderful sunset illuminating the features of the land. The sea, rivers and estuaries shine with light, and the only identifiable building is the cathedral, which has a shaft of light reaching up to the sky where a procession of figures of light move forward led by a cross. Back down on land, the site of each church is marked by a Celtic cross, the head of each lit up by the radiant sunset. It's a powerful image of the illumination of faith which we are called to display. Immediately following the Beatitudes in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says this to each of us:

'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.'

As we celebrate this Feast of All Saints, let us remember that we are, indeed, surrounded with an innumerable multitude of saints who encourage us both through their lives and witness, but also their call to each of us to be part of God's plan for humanity. We too are called to shine (like those Celtic crosses) with the light of Christ, knowing that in our journeying, the prayers of the saints of every time and place are constantly joined to ours in a **unity of love**, seeking to lead us ever closer to the heart of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Collect:

Almighty God, you have knit together your elect
in one communion and fellowship
in the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord:
grant us grace so to follow your blessed saints
in all virtuous and godly living
that we may come to those inexpressible joys
that you have prepared for those who truly love you;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Revelation 7: 9-end

⁹ After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ They cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!' ¹¹ And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, ¹² singing, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.' ¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?' ¹⁴ I said to him, 'Sir, you are the one that knows.' Then he said to me, 'These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵ For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. ¹⁶ They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; ¹⁷ for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'

1 John 3:1-3

³ See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ² Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. ³ And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

Matthew 5:1-12

⁵ When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: ³ 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' ⁴ 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵ 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ⁶ 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. ⁷ 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. ⁸ 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. ⁹ 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. ¹⁰ 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely ^[b] on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.