

All Saints' Day 2020

**O what their joy and their glory must be,
Those endless Sabbaths the blessed ones see;
Crown for the valiant, to weary ones, rest;
God shall be all, and in all ever blessed.** *Peter Abelard -(1079-1142)*

- the ecstatic words of the opening verse of Peter Abelard's hymn, *O Quanta Qualia* - the translation from the Latin by J M Neale. Abelard conjures up image upon image in drawing us to the powerful sense of the 'great cloud of witnesses' described in the Letter to the Hebrews (12: 1-2). The reading from the Book of Revelation also 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 – Jesus – and then John and Peter Abelard both capture our imagination providing a sense of our ultimate joy in 'those endless sabbaths', and the peace and serenity of 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.'*

Following that, the Gospel reading seems almost down to earth in comparison – the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount – familiar and much-loved words. Yet these blessings are far more radical in nature than we give them credit for. If we say that the passage from Revelation gives us the imagery of a multitude of saints gathered around the throne of God, then the Beatitudes represent a homely knowledge of the way in which all Christians may reveal the presence of God by fulfilling the actions suggested: meekness, mercy, purity, and so on.

We can go even further. Whilst we may think that Matthew paints the Beatitudes as a future consummation for humanity in God's fulfilment of love - something to be hoped for - I think that it is safe to say that they also point us to the Kingdom life God offers us here-and-now. Thus, they are NOT intended as some sort of entrance exam to the Kingdom, a requirement of an impossible tick-list to carry out before we are let in. Rather, they call us to consider how we ourselves might be signs of the Kingdom in the world we inhabit. They are about the action of God within our lives, a call to journey with Christ in *his* Resurrection Life. This is something Jesus makes explicit in the words he says immediately after them: **'You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.'**

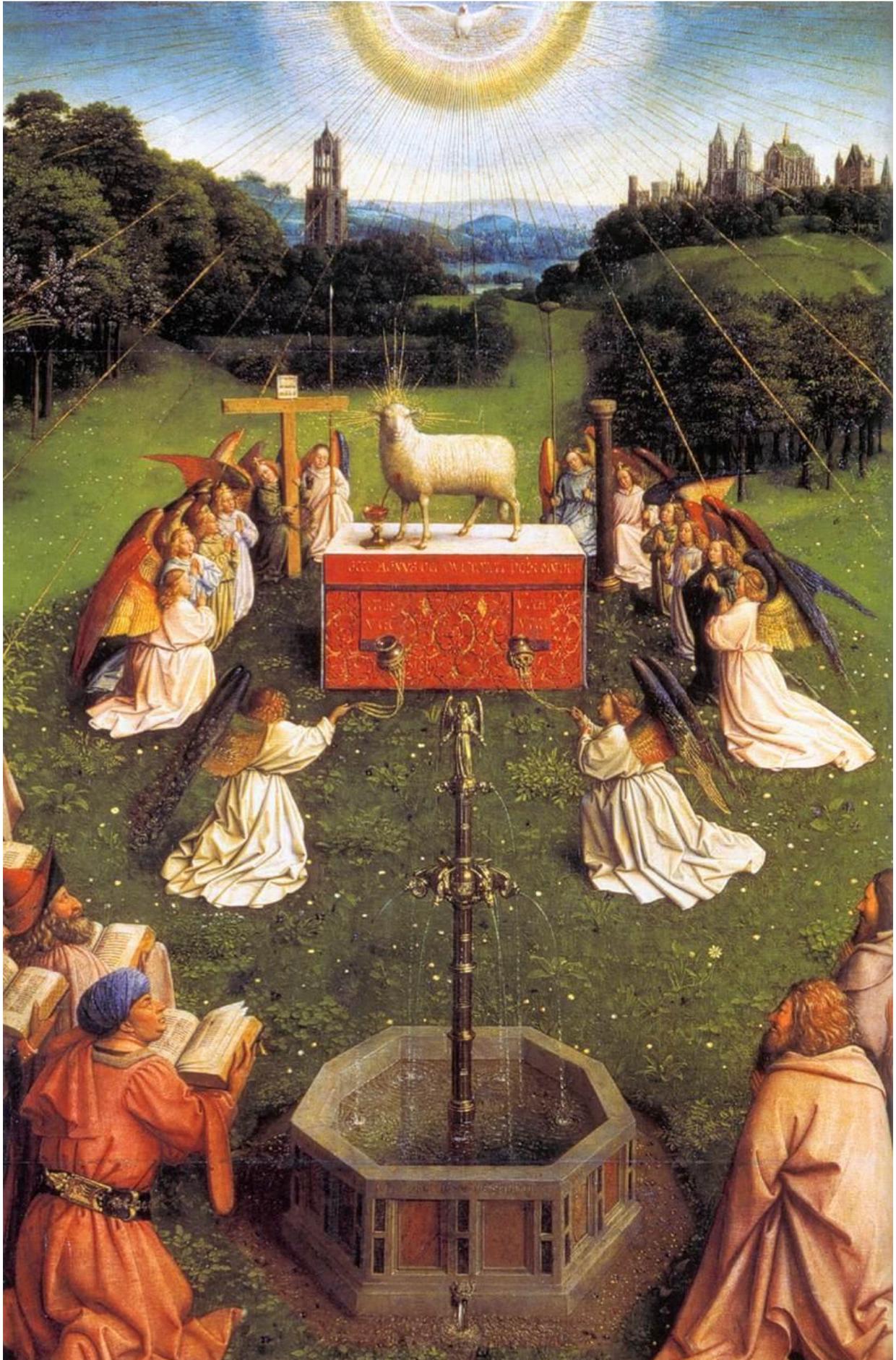
I think that we can therefore regard the Beatitudes speaking of a situation or a disposition which we might not associate with flourishing and joy, yet which do indeed draw us to know that through such experiences and others, God's grace and the Kingdom life might indeed be experienced and shared.

Note the shift in emphasis in the final Beatitude when Jesus moves from 'them' to 'you.' It always brings me up with a jolt. Surely it is not the desire of God that we should experience persecution and then rejoice. Well – this might not fit in with the lives we want to live, yet sometimes travelling this 'Beatitude' life does indeed lead to persecution and revilement. It is the way of the world - of broken humanity. We can all point to many different situations around the world where Christians suffer physical persecution or even death because of their faith. Looking at the barbaric act carried out in Nice just a couple of days ago at the Basilica of Notre-Dame de l'Assomption, one can see the true resonances of the relevance of the Beatitudes - as valid now as when Jesus spoke those words on a Galilean hillside. So too when we read the words, '*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted,*' we pray that this will be the case for the families of those who lost their lives in Nice, as well as the Smith family, known and loved by members of this congregation on the death of a beloved husband and father.

I leave you with something which has been growing in my mind during this increasingly strange time.

For much of Christian history there was a general understanding that following Christ, seeking to grow in faith, led to lives of joy. Even in suffering, deep joy could be experienced. We might think of the early Christian martyrs singing as the lions approached, or the group of trappist monks in Algeria in the 1990s who chose to stay in solidarity with their Muslim neighbours as the darkness of militant Islam fell and led to their martyrdom. Regardless of what was to come, they also revealed their joy in knowing the Lord and his continual presence with them. Somehow, this sense of deep-seated joy found through Faith in Jesus Christ has become rather forgotten by many within the Church, yet surely it is this joy manifested by Christians in all times and places that offers the greatest hope for humanity, and it is ours to give. This interiority is the antithesis of the 'happiness stakes' pedaled within secular society. Its marker is the unshakeable knowledge that no matter what happens to us, God offers us true freedom in which is true joy.

St Augustine of Hippo used to say that ***one loving heart sets another on fire***. That is our vocation as people who are called to be saints. Not impossible paragons who may dismay us in thinking that we can never live up to such ideals. No! Real flesh-and-blood saints, as all the saints, know and unknow, have ***truly*** been. We, with them, know that we are flawed people, who nevertheless seek to display deep joy through faith in the risen Christ; people whose loving hearts set others on fire as we follow Jesus - the Lamb who draws us to springs of the water of life – here, and now – and to all eternity.



Adoration of the Lamb (detail) Van Eyck brothers – Ghent Cathedral

Revelation 7: 9-end

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. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!' 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, singing, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.' Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?' 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. 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. 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.'

1 John 3: 1-3

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. 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. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

Matthew 5: 1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.'