

Readings for All Saints Sunday

29th October 2023

First Reading: Revelation 7:9-17

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.'

Second Reading: 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.

Gospel: St 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.'

A Reflection for All Saints Sunday

In the midst of all the troubles affecting the world, it is good to have the opportunity, which the Feast of All Saints affords us, to focus our thoughts elsewhere for a while, to focus our thoughts on heaven and God's kingdom. Christianity is a religion of hope; it holds out to us God's promise of better things to come, that ultimately all things will be made new. All our readings today have something to say about that hope, but especially the passage from Revelation.

The book of *The Revelation to John*, to give it the full title it has in the New Revised Standard Version, is a bit like Marmite for some people – they either love it or hate it. Many others simply find it bewildering.

Revelation is a genre of writing known as apocalypse which comes from the Greek word meaning 'revelation' or 'unveiling', so apocalyptic literature claims to reveal things that are usually hidden. Most Jewish apocalyptic books date from around the period 200 BC to 100 CE and are concerned with the end times. In the Old Testament, there are some similar visions in the Book of Daniel, which is thought to have been written around 175 BC. There are also some examples in the Apocrypha, but Revelation is the only example of apocalypse in the New Testament. It is thought to have been written in a time of severe persecution of the church, probably the Roman persecution towards the end of the 1st century CE. So although it seems unusual to us, it was a type of writing not uncommon when it was composed.

As well as visions of heaven, Revelation contains vivid and chaotic visions of judgment and suffering. It has themes of deliverance and wrath, battle, struggle and triumph side by side. It speaks of a direct connection between heaven and earth with warnings, commendations for perseverance, and rebukes for lukewarm commitment. The visions are both wonderful and terrifying. Our aim should not be to try to interpret the precise details of what is given to us. Instead we should listen to the assurance of God's power and purpose in both judgment and salvation. God's sovereignty is already manifest in heaven and is guaranteed by Christ to be triumphant on earth in due time.

Today's passage for this Feast of All Saints gives us a glorious image of a multitude so vast it cannot be counted, a beautiful diversity of people from every nation, joining the angels gathered around God's throne in joyous worship and celebration. It is a vision of all the saints that encourages hope and faithfulness, trusting in God's mercy and future deliverance, and the ultimate victory of good over evil. It is a vision that demonstrates God's inclusiveness, welcoming all people.

When we worship, we join our hearts, minds and voices with that company of heaven who worship God day and night around the heavenly throne and under God's eternal protection. As we hear each week in the Eucharistic Prayer:

As children of your redeeming purpose
we offer you our praise,
with angels and archangels

and the whole company of heaven
singing the hymn of your unending glory.

In considering this multitude from every nation, I hope that it is becoming clear that the saints we celebrate on the Feast of All Saints are not just those who have a capital S for their Saint. They are part of that multitude of course, from the first apostles and the leaders of the early church all the way to those heroes of the faith of more recent times that we commemorate. But there are also all those from many generations who have died in faith, including our own loved ones whom we will specifically remember later this week on All Souls Day. And there are also all those ordinary saints, faithful disciples who are hard at work today trying to make this world a more heavenly place. There are no tiers of sainthood; the saints are all the children of God, both living and departed.

If Revelation gives us hope for the future fulfilment of God's kingdom, today's short reading from the first letter of John gives hope to a community of believers struggling with the reality of their daily lives, which included disagreements and divisions. It reminds us that to be a child of God is a gift from God. The promise is that we are children of God now, and, when God is revealed, we will be like God. We are the saints not yet made perfect, but with our saintly attributes because God has made us who we are now and who we will become. This should be reassuring in our daily struggles, but it is a challenge too because it also applies to those around us, including people we find difficult.

Today's Gospel reading, The Beatitudes, from the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, gives hope in the values of God's kingdom. It contrasts the values of the Kingdom of God with those of the world. The Roman world of Jesus' time emphasised the importance of position, power and wealth – so not very different from today's world. The Kingdom of God finds value in poverty, mercy, peace-making and being persecuted – a total contrast to those worldly values.

In reflecting God's values, the challenge the Beatitudes give us is to live a life worthy of God's kingdom, regardless of earthly reward. They provide some over-arching principles for saintly living - in its best sense, rather than a holier-than-thou killjoy. They give us values of humility, mercy, peace-making that the world so desperately needs more of. Together with the glimpses we are given in Revelation of the vision of heaven, knowing how the story will end, inspires us to do what we can to make earth more like heaven – to strive for an end to hunger and thirst, to strive for unity and peace, to strive for the good of all God's creation.

So today, as we keep the Feast of All Saints, we celebrate the hope of God's kingdom, the promise of better things to come, the promise of renewal. We give thanks that we are children of God, part of that great company of all the saints who will be made perfect in God's image in due time. We hold out the light of that hope in the darkness of world though the values we hold and the way we live our lives. And we praise and worship God with the whole company of the living and departed, united with those around the throne of heaven.