

## **Sermon for Sunday 5 November 2023 – All Saints Sunday**

**Revd Graham Naylor, Curate**

***Revelation 7.9-17; Psalm 34.1-10; 1 John 3.1-3; Matthew 5.1-12***

May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Please do be seated.

Hopefully you have a separate piece of paper, that looks like that. [\[see separate document\]](#). You may find it useful to have that in sight, you may not, but more importantly, it's something that you can take away and ponder on.

So, All Saints Day - apparently it begun in the fourth century to remember the saints and the martyrs. In the 7th century, 13th May was designated as the day to remember the Blessed Virgin and all the Martyrs; that was Pope Boniface IV when he consecrated the Pantheon. In the 8th century, Pope Gregory II decides to outdo him, maybe, and he is credited with moving the date to the 1st November because he dedicated a chapel in the Basilica of St Peter in Rome to all the saints. And then in the 9th century, Gregory IV went one step further and ordered that the whole church was to celebrate All Saints Day.

All very well, you say, Graham, but we're post the Reformation; and we are. But the Book of Common Prayer, which still remains a foundational document of the Church of England's doctrine, says this about All Saints Day - 'it is a day to celebrate the unity of Christians of all ages, countries and races in Christ, and the perfection of that unity in heaven'. So there's the background to All Saints Day, and as Simon said earlier, we remember the saints and the martyrs, and those saints, those believers, who've gone before us, those who have influenced our journey of faith. You may like to think about who they might be in your life.

You may want to do that rather than listen to what I've got to say. But there you go. A question for you, or two questions, in fact. What are the churchwardens doing at the early part of the service when they're doing a headcount? That's one question. And your other question is, how many people are here worshipping God Almighty today, as we gather as the community of believers? Two questions; what are we doing with the headcount, and how many people are here today worshipping?

I'll leave you to ponder those as we turn to our gospel reading. Now, the bit before this gospel reading is an introduction to what we know as the Sermon on the Mount. And the summary introduction of what Jesus has been doing is he has been proclaiming the kingdom. The message of the kingdom, 'Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near.'

That may shock you. His message wasn't, I've come to tell you that God loves you, although that is true, and he demonstrated that. He didn't come to say you can have a wonderful life, although he demonstrated that life in all its fullness. But his message was repent; have a change of mind; turn your life around, because the kingdom of God has come near. There's a cartoon I saw this week where Jesus is

portrayed saying, 'Repent for the kingdom of God is near', and someone in the crowd, in a speech bubble, says, 'He's not very tolerant for the Son of God, is he?'

So Jesus has been proclaiming the message of repent for the kingdom of God has come near. He calls the disciples to follow him; he proclaims the good news of the kingdom; he cures every disease and sickness; he makes people whole; **and** his fame spread throughout all Syria. Now, it is not surprising that his fame spread throughout the area if he was preaching this message and demonstrating it. And the crowds are following him, and we pick up in our Gospel reading, which you've got on your sheet; he retires to the mountain and he sits down.

I think it was Pete who said to us last week, sitting down was the posture of a teacher, bit like Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth. He read the Scriptures from Isaiah and he sat down; he was to teach. And notice that he's teaching his disciples; the crowds who probably followed on were eavesdropping, but he is teaching the disciples. What he says next is to followers of Jesus, to believers, not to unbelievers. And he taught them.

The reason I've given you a sheet is because when we look in our Bibles and the way it's laid out, it doesn't really do justice to the Greek text. And don't worry, you're not going to have a Greek lesson this morning other than to say the first four Beatitudes are made up of 36 Greek words and the second four are 36 Greek words. It's all very carefully constructed and we need to pay attention to that. You'll see, that Matthew 5.3 I've got in the margin, and 5.10 I've got in the margin. Then I've offset some. This makes what's called an inclusio - bookended. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven', the first Beatitude, and then the eighth, 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'. We have a beginning and an end that talks about theirs **is** -present tense - the kingdom of heaven.

But we have two groups of three that are in the future tense; 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they **will** be comforted'; 'Blessed the meek, for they **will** inherit the earth', and so on. And theologians say that maybe they're in two groups. One is about need, maybe not so much the meek, and about righteousness or Christian character; because Jesus has been teaching about the kingdom, generally, and then to his disciples, more specifically about living in the kingdom.

And he says, 'Blessed are those...'; not a great translation of the Greek *makarios*, which leans on the Hebrew of *ashrei*. Bett'er translations may be 'fortunate' or 'a life to be envied'. Substitute those for a moment. To be envied are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. To be envied are those who mourn, for they will be compensated. You get the idea?

This is a mix of what theologians talk about as being 'partially realised eschatology'. You don't have to remember that, and I'm not trying to be clever by saying it; but that's the term, an easier way of saying it, and the way I remember it, is the 'now but not yet'. The kingdom of God had come near in the person of Jesus Christ; **now**, but not yet fully, because that happens at the end time, the eschaton. But who will realise fully what is only realised partially at the moment? It is those who are righteous, those who are

living in God. So this idea of the now and not yet, I think we can put together with the saints on earth, what we call the *Church Militant* and the saints who have gone before us, what we call the *Church Triumphant*.

So back to my opening question. How many are gathered for worship this morning? Any votes? It's not a rhetorical question, have a go. How many are gathered for worship this morning? Have a quick count up... 40? Any advance on 40? I feel like an auctioneer! 50? Any advance? 55? And the answer to why the churchwardens count, and hopefully give us a message, is because of how many wafers Simon or I need to put in the ciborium, because we don't want to consume too many afterwards?

Going to our reading from Revelation, there is this vision that John has 'and he sees a great multitude that no one can count around the throne of God. From every nation, all tribes and peoples and language'; there are parallels to our readings; and they are before the throne of God, these are the righteous ones. And as we read through, John asks, 'who are these people?' Who are the ones robed in white? I had to chuckle at the first verse of the last hymn about white robes as I looked across at Simon, Lenny, Maureen and myself. But who are these? These are the ones who have lived a righteous life; they've come through trials and they've come through the great ordeal and they have endured.

The answer to the question of how many are gathered to worship is maybe answered by the story of a bishop, and I can't remember which one, and I've been asking friends, who were there when it happened, and we just can't remember. But there is a bishop in recent years who, when he filled in the service register at the end of the service, because that's the other reason the churchwardens count for us, is how many were present for the service. When he took a service in a church, where it said 'number of congregation', he would put infinity exclamation mark, as a reminder that not only the Church Militant, the saints on earth were gathered, but we gathered as the Communion of Saints. As it says in the Apostles' Creed with the Saints in Glory.

Just think about that, this morning; we are joining our worship with the worship around the thrones of the Saints in Glory. I like to think of it like this... When there are royal events on television, there are people who are present and are actively involved, and then there are those of us who watch on television, and we're that bit remote from it. If you're anything like my mother, if it's a royal event that is in church, she will stand up and sing the hymns, and she'll make everybody stand up (sorry, this is my mother in Turkey), will make everybody stand up and sing the national anthem. Not there in person, but even out in Turkey, Carol makes the expats stand up and sing the national anthem; it's quite embarrassing, I've been there.

But you get the idea that the difference between those who are there in person and those who are a little bit remote, but still involved; maybe that's a bit like our worship on a Sunday morning. There is this worship going on around the throne in the presence of God, and God present in his temple, the community of believers. We are worshipping, but it's the 'now, but not yet'.

One of the things that we do at All Saints is we remember those, as I said earlier, those saints who go before us, those saints who are now in glory. I wonder who they are for you? For me, two come to mind -

my old Sunday school teacher, Elsie Campbell, a retired missionary; Miss Elsie Campbell, Aunt Elsie, to us. If you want to have an image of Elsie Campbell, think of the postmistress in Postman Pat... Bun on her head, little glasses, who in her 80s; was beautiful because the radiance of her Lord Jesus Christ just shone out of her; and the way she encouraged us young folk to follow the Lord and Saviour that she followed. And then another, my Uncle Ben, Anglican priest in South Africa under apartheid, who had to escape the country when the secret police came for him because he refused to have segregated congregations; who wasn't bitter, who was an encourager, who was a faithful priest.

We will say, or rather Simon, as he presides, will say for us in the Eucharistic Prayer, because of what has just been said, 'therefore, with angels and archangels and with **all** the company of heaven, we proclaim your great and glorious name ever praising you and singing...' And we will sing with the whole company of heaven, 'Holy, holy, holy'. We'll be singing with the saints and the martyrs. We'll be singing with the Elsie Campbell's and the Uncle Ben's as they experience the presence of God in a way that we will one day all do.

So, brothers and sisters, saints, can I encourage you to look up, have a bigger vision of what it is to be part of the communion of saints on this All Saints Day, and as we move into the future? Amen.