



All Saints

Sermon by Revd Margaret Place



Sunday 1 November 2020

READINGS

Revelation 7: 9-17; Psalm 34: 1-10, 22; 1 John 3: 1-3; Matthew 5: 1-12

All Saints, All Souls and the Kingdom of Heaven

May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

During this lockdown period, one of the many programmes we have been following has been one depicting the life and work of the Hubble Space telescope. I'm sure those of you who have watched any such programmes will agree that what we are learning about the universe is truly stunning. Whether it was in this series or in another, I know one of the things that fascinated me was to see evidence of a star being born, and on another occasion, a star dying. One stands in the light of our own star – the sun – and doesn't think of it as a finite creation which was born – and our planet developed and grew and became inhabitable as a result – and one day it's going to die. It appears that God has woven into the entire universe – or universes – the concept of beginnings and endings – birth and death. Nothing is permanent, nothing is static. Within our life experience and perception, everything starts somewhere and nothing will last forever.

So at this time of the year we remind ourselves of this. On All Souls and All Saints we call to mind the many we remember - and the older we grow, the more there are to lose and to remember. And this year particularly we sympathise and pray for the families who are mourning the Covid 19 victims, those directly and indirectly affected. Unexpected and sad, these deaths are frighteningly out of anyone's control, and we are thrust back into the mind-set of a history before modern medicine where it seems we are thrown upon the mercies of a capricious Fate, at least until modern medicine can get on top of it, and superstitious rituals are only surpassed by panic and fake news.

Two of our readings for today are in tune with the theme of this day. The reading from Revelation speaks of the end times and we look forward to a future when all troubles are over, answers to everything are found, and the ends are all neatly and gloriously tied up and we can be secure in an unchanging future in the presence of God. Likewise the short passage from the first letter of John is equally optimistic and looking towards Christ's ultimate triumph. But then, why the beatitudes or the opening of the Sermon on the Mount, for our words from Jesus? How will that help us on these two rather sobering days when we are required to become aware of our own and others' mortality?

Most commentators regard the Sermon on the Mount as Jesus' teaching his closest followers – the disciples whom he would later commission as leaders, evangelists and apostles. Parables and stories were for the simple – those who wanted to do God's will and who needed God's help in very difficult and poverty stricken circumstances. So what is this more sophisticated approach Jesus is using teaching disciples here?

Jesus is talking to people who already have some idea of what his mission was, and the Kingdom of heaven was something they had already heard about and to a greater or lesser extent understood what it meant. Here Jesus is going further than a lot of teachers of his day and he is showing attitudes towards building the kingdom rather than rules to be followed. An interesting observation – two of the beatitudes, blessed are the poor in spirit, and blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, in both cases, theirs is the kingdom of heaven – now, at the moment. All the rest have future promises.

They WILL be comforted, they WILL be filled and so on. So if Jesus is teaching his disciples, he is showing that the Kingdom of heaven has come, and the poor in spirit – the so called sinners he hung around with, and those persecuted for righteousness sake – had already experienced this kingdom of heaven. But the disciples needed to understand and probably experience the persecution at the hands of some of the religious leaders, and it would get worse, if they conveyed this attitude. The Kingdom of heaven is a present reality if in its infancy. The rest would gradually come into being, and this was both teaching them how the kingdom would gradually come about and what it would look like, what it needs, and a warning of the persecution that would accompany something as radical as this.

So when we are remembering the saints and souls gone before, we realise we are in communion with those who have been on the same path Jesus called them to be, and we are both heirs to their contribution, and also disciples of Christ in our own right. We are part of a process, and our lives as members of the kingdom of heaven will be the legacy to those who come after us, be they members of our biological family, or members of our church family, or simply those we meet and work with in our daily lives. Very few of us become stained-glass-window saints, but hopefully all of us will be remembered on this day in the years to come.

But it is also true that the saints we remember lived in a very different world and some of that world they passed on to us needed more of Christ's presence than they were able to fix in their time. We had to finish it, and we can look our descendants in the face knowing that some progress has been made, although we can always do more.

Those of us who are older will remember how hard it was for the disabled to find their place in society, and those with physical and mental challenges were often ostracized and discriminated against in the most hurtful way with no thought of how they were de-humanised thereby. Sexual harassment and women and child abuse was swept under that carpet as something to be ashamed of. At least we are now aware of gender-based violence, sexual harassment and child abuse, although much still needs to be done. And the Second World War brought to our consciousness, anti-Semitism, and by extension, racism of all kinds, which has become very much on the human agenda and is an ongoing mission.

If we look at the Beatitudes, we will see that all those who brought about such awareness of social ills often were the meek who stuck to their guns, or those who mourned and as a result became activists, or some who were merciful and longed for peace and volunteered and sacrificed much, and almost all would have been persecuted, by the press if no one else.

So those of us "with issues" are in good company, and I daresay the saints and souls of our generations will be fighting their battles on climate change and the shortage of water, air pollution and food insecurity, not to mention pandemics which are in danger of becoming normal in our world, all of which are already being felt, and, of course, the poor are the first to be affected and the last to be assisted. So the Kingdom of heaven is still a baby, struggling to breathe in a world which says all the right things, but doesn't necessarily want to do anything about this new order, and it needs a lot of help.

So as we remember our much loved parents, grandparents, teachers, mentors and all those whose example and contribution have given us so much to be grateful for, let us not forget that we are saints and souls too, and may this time be one of accepting our place amongst the communion of saints, taking up the cudgels on the part of the Kingdom of Heaven of which we are part, and by the grace of God, future generations will look back on their 1st November and remember us with love and gratitude too. And may the kingdom of heaven truly be ours.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and in the end, we all meet in Zion – the new Jerusalem. Let us continue as citizens of this kingdom, taking what came before, and contributing in Christ to what will come after, in the name of our Lord and Saviour.