

All Saints

2 November 2008

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Psalm 34:1-10

Revelations 7:9-17

John 3: 1-1

Matthew 5: 1-12

Blessed by God

Today we celebrate All Saints Day. This feast day was originally in memory of all the martyrs, starting with the first martyr, Stephen. In our Parish we also commemorate the first British martyr, Alban. The concept for All Saints Day has been extended to apply to all those who die in faith, and so at this time we can reflect on the lives of our loved ones, those who have gone before us.

That brief background to the Feast Day therefore gives us a context for our bible readings today. From our Psalm we heard the words, "My soul will glory in the Lord", and "O taste and see how gracious the Lord is." From Revelations we hear about the new heaven and the new earth and the words that God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, words our choir hopes to be singing next Sunday when we will have the memorial service for Diane Campbell-Hunt. 1 John reminds us that we are all children of God. Then in our gospel reading we have part of the sermon on the mount, the Beatitudes, which talk about how we can live in this life, illustrating that God's kingdom is here and now, it is not just about what happens after this earthly life.

So this celebration today is not just about the saints and martyrs of the Bible and from ancient church days. It is about us and those who have gone before us. It is about living life in a spiritual awareness that recognises our connection with God and with each other.

I often read the Beatitudes at funeral services, for I think those words remind us at a time like that how God blesses us in our difficult times. These are some of the most loved words from the gospels, yet they are some of the most difficult words to live up to. Imagine someone who lived only by those words, we could well regard them as a fanatic. But then after they died we would no doubt regard them as a saint.

Blessed are the poor, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers. Are those really the qualities or characteristics that people admire or strive for today? We are near the end of an election campaign. Are those the things that you have seen held up as ideals for society, for good living? Of course not. At a time like this we would have to rewrite the Beatitudes if we were to properly reflect what people believe.

Blessed are those who do well for themselves and become millionaires, for others will lose all their savings in collapsed businesses. Blessed are those who think all criminals should be locked up for life, for they will keep us safe. Blessed are those who can drag up some past misdemeanour of an election candidate and get headlines for it, for they will be ahead in the opinion polls. Blessed are those who turn away desperate people who want to come here as refugees, for they will keep our population pure. Blessed are those who succeed in business by adding toxic

chemicals to our food and farmland or by polluting our air and water, for they will succeed in business. Blessed are those who buy all the goods they see advertised, for they will keep the economy buoyant. Blessed are the banks who provide endless credit to borrowers, for they will keep the shop owners and manufacturers happy. Blessed are those who think their religion is the only right one, for they will persecute others for self-righteousness' sake. Blessed are the makers of television programmes which show endless violence, for they will attract advertisers who want to sell products to the viewers and our children will become big spenders of consumer products, as well as thinking that violence is ok.

This tells us that what Jesus taught is a long way from how people behave. We can meet here in church and agree with each other that peace is one of our greatest goals. But in the 1960's or 70's, those who took part in peace activities were labelled as communists, and our own SIS was taking note of who took part in those activities. In the shelter of our church we can talk about tolerance and forgiveness. But after a terrorist act killing 3,000 people, most people in America strongly supported retaliatory action that has killed 100,000 or more people.

So living by the Beatitudes can be very dangerous in today's society. How often do we see that those who are meek and merciful, who are pure in heart, who love their enemies, are likely to be persecuted or martyred for the way they are? That's why Jesus was killed. That's why Gandhi was killed. That's why Nelson Mandela spent so many years in jail. That's why John F Kennedy, Martin Luther King and John Lennon were killed. That's why I have already read that Barack Obama will be assassinated if he is elected President.

Time and again, Jesus refused to allow popular opinion and fashionable prejudice to determine the way he lived or the way he treated people. He welcomed people who were generally shunned in society. He broke religious rules because he accepted every person as a person with a soul, who came from God and would return to God. And the more he modelled this radical peacemaking, this purity of heart, the more he was hated and reviled.

In our Revelations reading we heard these words. "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"

What graphic words. Jesus stuck to his own truth and washed his own robes in his own blood, and even then he continued to offer mercy and forgiveness. The Lamb continues to offer to us that pure mercy and love, as the message that that is what God is about. That presents us with a most difficult decision. Will we accept the struggle of the Beatitudes or will we reject them, and follow the greed and prejudices that prevail in our society? Will we put our trust in God, rather than in this material world, in money and power as it is held up in this world today? Are we ready to accept that a life which includes grieving and persecution will still be a blessed life?

We must remember we are not in this alone. We have the comfort and support of those we join with in our worship and praise, we have the support of those who have

gone before us. That's what All Saint Day is about, as we gather around the Lord's table for this holy meal. We gather here in the company of Mary Magdalene, of Stephen, Alban, Francis of Assisi, and our own ancestors who have gone before us. There is this continuity in all life as all are connected through God's spirit in this whole body of God. If we are going to accept God's gift of salvation we will be dependent not just on God, but on all the saints who join us on our journey, including the living saints who will guide us on our way.

Blessing:

Go now in the knowledge that we come from God and will return to God.
Hunger and thirst for righteousness;
Show mercy and make peace.

May God bless you and take away your burdens.
May Christ Jesus be your shepherd and your shelter
And may the Holy Spirit guide you into new life. Amen