

Readings: *Apocalypse 7: 2 – 4, 9 – 14; Psalm 23 (24): 1 – 6; 1 John 3:1 – 3; Matthew 5: 1 – 12.*

Today's Solemnity celebrates all the men women and children who already share in the glory and the joy of heaven. A small number of them – small, that is, in comparison to the whole – have been recognized by the Church and commemorated by the venerating of their relics, the consecration of churches or chapels in their honour, or by the inclusion of their names in local or universal calendars. We think of them as the Saints (with a capital S): but there are, no doubt, millions more whose lives have been so transformed by the grace of God that they already share in the joys of heaven. They are among God's holy ones – which is what the word 'saints' means. Today's first reading speaks of *a huge number, impossible to count, of people from every nation, race, tribe and language; standing in front of the throne and in front of the Lamb, dressed in white robes and holding palms in their hands.* In this vision the author – John the Theologian – gives us a picture of the ultimate triumph of God's love through the saving death of his Son – the Lamb of God – revealed in the lives of his people.

Some of the Saints have left us examples of Christian living or teaching about our faith, but of many we know little more than their names and that they were recognized in their lifetimes as faithful disciples of the Lord. In this way they play a part on the lives of living Christians. But all the saints – the unknown and unremembered as well as the known and celebrated – have a part to play in our lives. They witness to the truths which we confess when we join in one of the creeds. In the Nicene Creed we look forward to *the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come,* and in the Apostles' Creed we acknowledge our belief in *the communion of saints ... the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.* The saints are the repeated reminder that this earthly life is not the whole of God's plan for us – the best is yet to come.

Our faith in the Communion of Saints is nowhere better expressed than in the words of a hymn by the Puritan pastor Richard Baxter:

*Within the fellowship of saints is wisdom, safety and delight;
and when my heart declines and faints, it's raised by their heat and light*

*Before thy throne we daily meet as joint petitioners to thee;
in spirit each the other greet and shall again each other see.*