

So now may I speak and may we hear, in the name of the living God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen. Please be seated.

Well as Mandy said at the beginning of the service, it is indeed the season of surprises, and I've got another little one for you.

There are two New Testament readings appointed for All Saints' Day and the one which I was sent, and on which I'm about to preach, is the other one, so I'm going to read it now: two doses!

And the reading from the book of Revelation, the seventh chapter, beginning at the ninth verse, And you'll see how relevant this is to All Saints' Day.

John says 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 worshiped God, singing 'Amen', blessing and honour and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving 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 every tear from their eyes.

This is the word of the lord; thanks be to God. Amen.

Well once again good morning. It is very good to be with you and to share in your worship on this All Saints' Day, and not least after last night's news, about an impending further lockdown.

I have two big questions for us to think about this morning: firstly what is God up to? And secondly where do we fit into that? Well our Bible readings take us, today, to the heart of those two questions.

Firstly, what is God up to? It's perhaps the biggest theological question we can ever ask, and it can either be a an academic kind of question: what is the meaning of creation? What is God's purpose and plan? Or it can be the cry of a human heart, faced with trauma and tragedy. What is God doing? Where is he now? Perhaps today in the midst of this pandemic, and the news we have just received.

Well the book of Revelation with all its strange ideas and images, is essentially about that big picture, of what God is doing , about God's ultimate plan for the whole of creation. It

offers us what you might call a glimpse behind the scenes. John presents his audience with the story of what God is ultimately doing with the whole of creation, in order to help them to make sense of, and to cope with, what was happening to them in the present, which in many cases for those first Christians was pretty scary and terrible, just as it is for many people today.

And John was also telling them about their part within God's plan. As followers of Jesus Christ, whom Jesus has commissioned to carry on his work on Earth. So let's start with that big picture: what is God up to?

The idea of the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven as Matthew refers to it, is one of the headline themes in the Bible and especially in the teaching of Jesus in the gospels. Time and again Jesus presents a picture of the world as God intends it to be, and as it one day will be. It gives us a glimpse of the culmination, the fulfilment of all things, when outsiders are welcomed at a king's great banquet; when lepers are cleansed and the blind can see and the lame can not only walk but leap and dance.

The whole idea of the kingdom of God is about creation being healed, and division and strife being things of the past. It is a picture of the healing and restoration of all things, so that finally the world and everything in it becomes as it was meant to be.

That is essentially what the book of Revelation is about. This, John is saying, is what is really happening behind the scenes, and this is where things are going, even though maybe it doesn't feel like it much of the time.

And that's really important, because it gives us something to hope for, and to aim for. God is in the business of redeeming the world, of setting it free, of bringing an end finally to death and disease and destruction; that is God's purpose and plan, culminating in the glorious vision that we heard in our reading from Revelation a few moments ago. This is the basis of the hope that should inspire us in our daily lives.

So if this is the end - the goal of the story - where do we fit into this here and now? Well, we human beings are called through Jesus Christ, to be agents of God's kingdom, breaking into the kingdom of this world, as a sign and foretaste of what God is doing, and will do, through Jesus Christ. And in the sermon on the mount, particularly the beatitudes we heard in our Gospel reading, Jesus gives us a picture of what that should look like.

The book of Revelation tells us that Jesus Christ is in the business of making all things new: renewing the whole of creation, and here in the beatitudes Jesus calls us to share in what he is doing, as his disciples and as citizens of his coming kingdom.

So the question for us today is this: are we ready to join in with what Jesus is doing, right here in Bradford, and in the places where we live and work?

The sermon on the mount calls us as followers of Jesus Christ to live radically new lives as citizens of the kingdom of heaven, precisely because we have glimpsed, and begun to understand, what God is doing.

We now know the end of the story: that God will renew the whole of creation, and we are called to live in ways that reflect that hope, even when things look dark and difficult as they do at the moment.

In the midst of all the uncertainties and anxieties of the current crisis it is all the more important that, we as Christians, keep our eyes fixed on the big picture: on what God is doing, and will do, to renew the whole of creation.

It is so easy - and tempting - for us to get bogged down, focusing on the troubles of the present, but time and again down the centuries Christians have been inspired by the vision of what is to come, and of the ultimate triumph of God's kingdom.

And as a result, they have lived as those who hunger and thirst after righteousness; who offer mercy and forgiveness in place of bitterness and hate, and who are peacemakers who bring reconciliation instead of division.

These are the things we need to remember on this All Saints' Day, with all that is going on in our nation and our world.

John's glorious vision of the kingdom of heaven, which can sustain us through the darkest of times. And Jesus called to us to live radically different lives, as citizens of his kingdom, bringing new life, and hope, to a fearful world. Amen.