

I have no doubt that you are all very familiar with our gospel reading, commonly referred to as The Beatitudes but before we come onto that, let's look for a few moments at the Revelation reading.

Over the centuries, Revelation has not enjoyed the best of reputations with its dramatic and often over the top apocalyptic language and not surprisingly has inspired fanatics and doomsayers in all manner of things from sectarian violence to anarchy. Indeed, when the New Testament was adopted in full 250 years or so after Jesus's death and resurrection, it only just made it into the final version, such was the controversy surrounding it.

So given its history I wondered why Revelation is so embedded in the church lectionary for All Saints Day. I think there are three very good reasons:

Firstly, when we hear and reflect on this reading it offers a unique opportunity to stand shoulder to shoulder in solidarity with and gratefulness for all those who have suffered for their faith throughout the history of Christianity.

Secondly, it provides the promise and hope for all those currently living amidst the often violent and overwhelming grief-stricken turbulences of their everyday life, that their immediate tribulations will one day come to an end. The reading assures them that they will experience a time when there will be no more mourning, crying or pain and where every tear will have been wiped away.

That is the promise and hope which has not only become the lifeboat for so many persecuted Christians today in places where fundamentalism of different religions and intervention by state control holds sway, but also closer to home, it is the same message which Revd Jon and I put at the heart of all the funerals we take, proclaiming a hope which transcends the immediate experience of grief and loss so that those who mourn may be comforted as their loved one is commended and committed to God's loving care.

And, thirdly it provides the counter balance to the opening book of the bible, Genesis, which asks where are we from? Whilst Revelation, as the final book of the bible, asks where are we going? Interestingly, they have the same answer – God, literally the Alpha and Omega of our faith. We were created by God, and it is with God whom we will live with eternally. I suspect that was understood by T.S.Eliot who once said “In my end is my beginning”.

And of course, bridging the beginning and the end is the Beatitudes, that wonderful narrative where Jesus tells us that all those who reach out in love from the depths of their humanity to their brothers and sisters, will be blessed by God.

Whilst we might be contemplating Jesus's words 2,000 years on with that wonderful gift of 20/20 hindsight his contemporary audience would have seen for themselves and understood that Jesus took the side of the disreputable, the excluded and the unimportant. They would have seen him comforting the sorrowful, standing up for what was right. Many would have personally experienced how gentle, kind, and compassionate he was to those in need or distress.

Unlike in the scripture known as the Ten Commandments, Jesus doesn't tell us what to do or what not to do. Jesus does not command us to be poor in spirit, to be gentle, to seek justice or broker peace. He simply assures us that if we follow his example, we will be blessed. Indeed Jesus takes for granted that we will be blessed by God.

Faith hope and love are at the heart of Christian discipleship. Think of the thousands who volunteer to give up their free time to help neighbours and vulnerable people. Or closer to home, those befrienders from within the church family who 3 years on are still in contact with the lonely folk we came into contact with during the pandemic. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Think of the manager at work who stands up for an employee being bullied, teased or tormented. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteous, for they shall be satisfied.

Think of the child who forgives someone who has hurt him or her at school. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Think of those who are working non-stop to create cease fires in Ukraine and Gaza. Blessed are the peacemakers.

Saying what he does, Jesus simply places God at the centre of not only his life, but in our lives too. Each beatitude depicts an essence of the ideal inner quality that should be evident in all God's faithful.

Blessedness is a spiritual state of well-being and prosperity – and I'm not talking here about money or wealth - but that deep, joy-filled contentment that Jane spoke about last week. The joy that cannot be shaken by poverty, grief, famine, persecution or any other trial or tragedy we might face in our lives.

We will be blessed because God will be present with us in those times of trial and tribulation, and we will be blessed by Him in those situations. To be blessed, is, ultimately, to experience the full impact of God's presence not only in our lives now, but as we heard in Revelation, also for all eternity.

Today is All Saint's Day and if you look at our stained glassed windows you will see many who are named as Saints with a capital 'S', having been formally recognised by the Church. But they are but a trickle in the vast ocean swell of unnamed saints with a small 's' who, like those I mentioned earlier found it within themselves to live out Jesus's teaching.

So today whilst we remember with thanksgiving before God the Saints with a capital 'S' who have gone before us, let us be equally thankful for those whom we have known more directly; the saints with a small 's', because through them we too are blessed.

Amen

Rev. Terry Ward-Hall, 5 November 23