

communion of saints

a sermon preached on the feast of

All Saints

30 October 2016

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18; Psalm 149; Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 6:20-31

Here's a question for us: thinking about 'the communion of saints', what picture do you have in mind? What does it look like? Who's in it?

The lections set for this feast day graphically testify to the tension that runs through Christian tradition; though admittedly, it is necessary to read beyond the narrow range of verses from both Daniel and the Psalm. Daniel's violent depiction of the Divine throne room is quite violent, marked by flames and shocking beasts.¹ God is 'righteous'; but God's dominion is accomplished by violence.² Psalm 149 starts out harmlessly enough; but quickly turns to shocking two-edged sword vengeance and punishment.³

So, on the one hand, a shocking and violent dualism: the world carved up into the insiders and outsiders, the saved and the damned, the righteous and the wicked. By this view, the communion of saints demands exclusion.

On the other hand, the letter to the church at Ephesus envisages a communion in which the saints of God will come to the knowledge of the "fullness of [the One] who fills all in all".⁴ Christ's 'dominion' seems to be envisaged as a 'fullness'. I mentioned this 'fullness' – the **πληρωμα** *plērōma* – during the Spring Series. It's a theological concept intimately associated with the Christian understanding of the eschaton as God's future which is always drawing us forward; into deeper and greater states of wholeness, quite literally completion. 'Completion', understood this way, involves the unification of all things. Because the fundamental state of God's creation is wholeness, *not* dividedness. This is a unitive vision; in striking contrast to the visions of both Daniel and the Psalm, which are fundamentally dualistic.

Herein lies Christianity's painful paradox. What *is* the nature of the 'communion of saints'? Is this 'communion' a perpetually, eternally, divided state of affairs, the 'saints' constituting only a church-approved class of persons? Sadly, this is a picture of God's 'communion of saints' which is instantly recognisable to people in our time. Or is the 'communion of saints' a picture of the 'all in all'; a unified state of affairs, such as was envisaged by the early church teacher Origen in his use of the Greek word *apocatastasis*; a kind of putting back together again that which had become fragmented.

Our problem is that our tradition harbours two visions so at odds with each other. We can search through the Scriptures and find many texts which support these vestly different visions: a vision of ultimate fragmentation; versus a vision of ultimate unification.

Looking at this in very practical terms, we can see that a dualistic vision is much more 'successful' at galvanising the energies that form institutions. In every era of the church, the churches have strengthened their institutional positions by successfully constructing enemies, outsiders, unclean, unrighteous, and so on. Church-sponsored murder of 'heretics', witches, Jews, blacks, gypsies, homosexuals – and God knows how many other forgotten minorities – have this one thing in common, always claiming a Divine 'mandate' in Scripture for ultimate fragmentation. Sadly, this is how we have built our Christian empire.

Looking around us, churches that structure themselves on a dualistic world view are much more 'successful', in terms of attendances and giving and so on. They always trade in certainties; the most important being the 'certainty' that some are 'saved', and some are

¹ Daniel 7:3-7
² Daniel 7:11,14
³ Psalm 149:6-9
⁴ Ephesians 1:23

‘damned’. A fundamental fragmentation of the whole human family lies at the heart of this kind of religion.

But while there may appear to be ‘success’ in terms of congregational ‘growth’ at the local, superficial level, in fact the violent dualism upon which this success depends is perhaps the greatest threat to the future of the church, indeed, in a time when religious respect has become crucial, to the human family in general. It’s violent dualism that drives people away from the church. Religion that makes its devotees ‘the saved’ may be, at the local level, ‘successful’ but is profoundly destructive at the level of the whole human family. The stakes are now very high – we cannot ignore this. Indeed, it will only become more pressing.

I mentioned last Sunday the topsy-turvy upside down Kingdom, which only the small, inconsequential, child-like can receive. In Jesus’ teaching we know as the Beatitudes his thoroughgoing programme of reversal challenges all our ‘common sense’ expectations: it is the poor who will be blessed; the hungry who will be filled, the weeping who will laugh, the excluded who will be included.⁵ Luke departs from Matthew at this point by immediately introducing the list of ‘woes’, which Matthew puts off till much later in his gospel, in Jesus final days.⁶ Just in case the reader doesn’t get it: the rich, the full, the laughing, and those with good reputation will all experience woe.⁷

In light of what I have been saying, the question immediately arises: in this teaching, does Jesus envisage a fragmented, divided human community? Is Jesus’ teaching here dualistic; or, is it unitive?

Though it’s very difficult to disentangle the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth from the 2000 years of teaching of the church, nevertheless it does strike me that the next few verses make it very clear that Jesus teaches that whoever we might construct as worthy of ‘woes’ we are to love, and to receive as we would like to be received. “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you”⁸ is an unmistakably unitive teaching; a vision of a unified, whole, complete human community. Whatever we construct as ‘other’, ‘outsider’, ‘enemy’, ‘them’ – that is to say, whoever or whatever we construct as the scapegoat – Jesus tells us that these are part of us. So much so are they part of us that we are to love them as ourselves.⁹ Jesus teaches that our dualistic way of thinking is an illusion; and a deadly one at that.

The question that becomes increasingly pressing in our time, then, is this: will the church be able to cast off its 2000 years of dualism and fragmentation – which so infect our doctrines, liturgies, and hymns – and recover the unitive vision of the one we claim to follow? What vision of the ‘communion of saints’ will we live? This question is relevant for both the future of the planet, and the future of the church.

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⁵ Luke 6:20-22

⁶ Matthew 23:13-32

⁷ Luke 6:24-26

⁸ Luke 6:27

⁹ Luke 6:31,35