

for all the saints

a sermon preached on the

feast of all saints

5 November 2017

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5: 1-12.

Most of us probably met a saint last week—there are lots of them about but they are not always easy to spot for they look so much like us—just ordinary people. The saints meet us joyfully and warmly, when they meet us, they might tell us something about their life and about the gratitude they have for all the blessings they have received in this life even though we might know that life has been pretty tough for them. Towards the end of their life on this earth they usually express great hope for the future often expressed in who and what they are going to see—many say they are looking forward to the music.

This is an important day for the special remembrance of saints and in particular the ordinary ones whom the church has not recognised yet—which doesn't really matter because God has known them all along. Think of that man in Patmos who had that same sense of what is and is to come. He had seen the persecutions and had himself suffered, having to stand up for his faith in the face of danger. Banishment was his punishment and he knew even worse was to come. What was to come was a great shaking and shifting of the fragile church, faced with confessing and risking their life or slipping quietly into the grey fog of unbelief, misbelief and no belief. His words strengthened the church under persecution and nerved it for the hard times to come. They stood firm, we know that, but it was never easy and we wonder how we might wonder how we would have managed ourselves, ordinary saints that we are, under that testing pressure.

And of what is to come, John the divine writes with such vivid imagination, such eloquence passion, with verbal pictures and metaphors, sounds and images that have comforted many in great distress. He has also provided a challenge to cryptographers, mystic interpreters and seekers after answers from these scriptures.

Let us consider those saints, ordinary Christians, under extra ordinary pressure. They were encouraged, united and willing to stand firm. They remembered the sufferings of the past, they steeled themselves for what was to come, holding fast to those promises in the Revelation of John and looking forward to the promises of heaven, the river, the trees, those they had loved and lost, the mighty choirs, the heavenly music and the discomfiture of those who went into the bottomless pit. They had a firm sense of what was, and is to come.

And what of us who hear and read these words now. We may struggle to make any sense of them: the imagery is lurid, the pictures stark: the time of trial, the thousand years, the horsemen, the dragons and the Lamb in the midst. It is thrilling yet mystifying and also a bit alarming.

Today we think of these saints in glory: many of them we know, some we have heard about but countless thousands upon thousands surround the throne and the Lamb is in the midst. Is it true? Is it real? Fantastic yes; but why not real, for the saints are real.

How do we recognise them?

We know them because they can see the beatitudes the right way up. They have experienced what it is like to be meek, sorrowful, hungry and thirsty for justice: they have been wearied to the point of oblivion, almost empty in spirit, they have found danger and despair in trying to keep peace in families, neighbourhoods, and nations and they have

somehow kept their soul healthy, their spirit pure. They know the blessings: the consolations, the earthly inheritance, the satisfaction of knowing that justice will prevail, and the mercy of God and sometimes of neighbour. They know the kingdom of heaven in their poverty and the kingdom heaven belongs to them who have suffered and endured for the cause of right. These who have lived and risked and dared and dreamed are saints. The story of John's Patmos fantasy is full of praise and singing and choirs of angels and music. There is something wrong with a theology that cannot create triumphant music; as well as comforting psalms and the sensitive divine love songs—but there needs also to be something of a note of the triumphant—the complete—something of the cry of Jesus on the cross; it is finished, complete, resolved, done, Hallelujah.

It is true that we have at times suffered from a different kind of triumphalism; the arrogance of the righteous, the prejudice of the powerful who think they are right because they have power, the stirring battle songs to encourage 'marching as to war'. Some of us have moved on: we have learned that we may be called to suffer and to die but not to cause suffering and to kill. The songs of the saints praise the Lord day and night in his temple. One of the elders asks the question to which he already knows the answer once he thinks about it. 'Who are these... Oh yes these are the ones of course they are!'

And the ones who we call saints know how to weep. They are not afraid to feel and to express their feelings: if we do not grieve how can we be comforted; if we do not care how can we be peacemaker, or hungry and thirsty for justice; if we do not experience the despair of being empty in spirit right to the depths we cannot rejoice, we cannot sing the song of victory.

The saints we remember and give thanks for today, they were human, they were unaware of themselves but very aware of the world and could see it as the world Jesus died to save. They pointed throughout their life to the One beyond, above, inside, deep within 'the one who never left them or forsook them', the one who from childhood had wiped away their tears and was always available'. The saints always point to God, the God who wipes away our tears.

Picture a young man who in the last stage of his life, dying holding his Dad's hand—the young man say's 'Good night Dad—See you in the morning'—His Dad each time he told of this precious moment would with misty eyes mumble—'Oh God—I can hardly wait for that morning'.

Today we celebrate not just the saints who having suffered and now shine in Glory but we also worship and adore the God who wipes away the tears from our eyes.

Amen