

Rev. Terry Ward-Hall, 1 November 2020

Today is 1st November, celebrated in both the Catholic and Anglican traditions as All Saints Day. The word *Saint* is derived from the Latin *Sanctus*, meaning holy and refers to a person who was recognized as having lived a truly, holy life. Our Collect reflected that with the words “Grant us grace so to follow thy blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living”.

The historical recognition and importance of saints is reflected in the naming of Parish churches. 11 of our 20 Deanery churches are called Saint something or other and another 3 are called All Saints.

This is not surprising really as most churches were either built before the Church of England split from the Roman Catholic church or were built during the 19th century during a period known as the Catholic Revival, ushered in via the Oxford Movement, which began at the university at the heart of our very own Diocese, so we here at Holy Trinity are one of the exceptions rather than the rule.

We may be called Holy Trinity but if you've ever walked around this church and looked at our stained glass windows, you will see that we have dedications to no fewer than 11 different saints, including 5 women. Indeed our main Eastern window portrays St Helena, (pause) St Elizabeth (pause) and St Mary.

But today is not the day to recall the life of just one particular saint, but all the saints. Today is a time when we remember and celebrate men and women in whose lives the grace of God was powerfully at work. These will include saints with a capital 'S' who have been formally recognized by the Church, but today also allows us to remember with thanksgiving before God those whom we have known more directly; those who gave us life, or who nurtured us in faith: saints with a small 's'.

I think it is no coincidence therefore that the reading specified for All Saints Day is always the one we have just heard - the Beatitudes - because Jesus does not merely teach the Beatitudes, he lives out the Beatitudes right through to his crucifixion. In fact, you could say that he is the Beatitudes. If we focus on Jesus' life, we see what it means to be poor in spirit, to mourn, to be meek, gentle and merciful, to care for what is right, to be pure in heart, to make peace, to be persecuted.

Jesus doesn't say simply this is what you should do, but 'Come follow me'. Do as I do.

Each beatitude depicts an essence of the ideal inner quality 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 a deep, joy-filled contentment 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 also for all eternity.

And that message is at the heart of all Christian funerals. The Christian funeral is both a repetition and rehearsal of the Easter promise that there is something more, something that transcends our immediate experience of grief and loss.

When we commend those we have loved to God's loving and merciful care, we proclaim that God's kingdom is not some distant thing or place but exists now.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. And that is the challenge we are having to face up to even more during this pandemic. Whilst we can and do still speak hope into the funeral situation; whilst we can and do give thanks, prayers and blessing, those who mourn are often unable to do so in the normal way.

Sometimes they have been unable to visit their loved one to say goodbye; or unable to attend the funeral because numbers were restricted; or being denied comfort and support after the funeral because of social distancing and household restriction in place.

It's really, really difficult.

Fortunately, there are examples that aren't so painful or distressing. Think of the thousands who volunteered to give up their free time to help neighbours and vulnerable people at the start of Covid. Or closer to home, the thirty odd shopping angels and befrienders from within the church family. 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 righteousness, 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.

Or the individual who decides to regularly or systematically read the bible and is willing to open his or her heart to the message. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

The Saints with the capital S are easily identified, but in a moment of quiet I want you to think of a saint with a small s and thank God for them them.

Thank God for their kindness, gentleness, meekness, peace making efforts. For the way they follow Jesus with a servant heart. For those who recognize their need for God. For those who are blessed.

Amen