



Revd Ro's Reflection on All Saints Sunday

Year A

1 John 3.1-3

Matthew 5.1-12

This Sunday is the Fourth Sunday before Advent but it is also the Sunday nearest to All Saints Day and will be celebrated as such in most churches, therefore I have decided to follow the readings for All Saints Day.

I have been reading a very old book recently, it was published in 1928 the year mum was born. It contains these two phrases, 'As the Eve of All Hallows moved into All Saint's Day' and 'our lives, our institutions, even our games should be governed by the teachings our Lord gave in his Sermon on the Mount.'

They struck me as I was thinking about my Reflection for this week. The Gospel reading for All Saints Day is from the Sermon on the Mount. The novel I referred to is a social history and a philosophical study of human attitudes, of morals and Christian behaviour and yes it's all contained in what would appear to be a youngster's school story book.

Quite often as I write a Reflection or when I write a talk for church I begin by rooting it in something from my own experience – from life. That is really what is happening in our readings; we have the theory behind Christian behaviour and then how we need to live it out in our everyday lives. That in essence is what the Saints did- they put their Christian faith into practice. That is what we are all called to do – indeed Saint Paul refers to all believers as 'saints.' It wasn't until I looked up those references that I realised he did this something like thirty nine times. Here are just a couple, Romans 1.7: 'To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.' and 1 Corinthians 1.2: 'To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:'

The first reading is from I John. No one really knows for sure who wrote these three short letters known as the Johannine Epistles or whether this 'John' is the writer of the third gospel or not. It's

always more difficult as well when we have one reading taken out of context. So it's worth just showing how this letter begins. 1 John 1,

¹ 'We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us.'

What John is referring to is Jesus Christ. As he writes it sounds as though he was indeed an eyewitness- knowing Jesus at first hand. Whether this is what he means or whether he is referring to intimate knowledge and understanding of Jesus' teachings we will never know. He goes on to say 'We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.'

That is the point, John is passing on the word of God revealed in Jesus so that all may understand Jesus' teaching and become followers of the new way of Christ.

⁵ 'This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.' 1 John 1

I was struck by the similarity between this at verse 5 and the opening of John's Gospel.

'What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.' John 1

The passage continues,

⁶ 'If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; ⁷ but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.' 1 John 1

So the message is quite clear. To accept the word of Jesus is just the beginning- you must follow his teachings, 'turn from sin and turn to Christ.' It is putting Jesus' teachings into action in our own lives. This is not preamble I have included it as an introduction to today's reading, it is short enough to quote in full, 1 John 3.1-3

¹ 'See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ²Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. ³ And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.'

If we look at the first line of this passage once again we are reminded of John 1,

'He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.

¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,'

If we think of the teaching of St. Paul in his various epistles he shows quite clearly that Jesus is the Anointed One, The Messiah. Jesus is God's Son and all who believe in him are therefore children of God and co-heirs with him. That is, we inherit the promises of God won for us by Jesus, God incarnate. Jesus won Salvation for us. He will come again to judge God's newly created order which will be completed when all is brought into perfection. Each Christian will not only inherit this but it is up to each Christian to behave as Jesus taught so that we help to bring that new creation into being. It is vital, says John in our reading, to understand that 'the world' did not accept Jesus and it is likely that his followers will face persecution and difficulties too. John is making the distinction between

the goodness of Jesus and God's values and the people who are his followers, and all those who turn their back on goodness to pursue their own ways leading to selfishness and sin.

He is not condemning creation or God's created world, indeed he has talked of God's perfected creation. No, the 'world' he refers to here would in that sense be linked to that old phrase, 'the world, the flesh and the devil.'

So then John continues at verse 2, 'You are beloved, you are God's children because you have turned from sin and turned to Christ. Because of that you are heirs to the new creation. What that will be he says no one can know but we will be changed and be united with Jesus when we finally see him face to face when the new creation is complete.'

But, and it is important to remember this, that perfection has come to earth. It has come to earth in the form of Jesus. Those who saw him saw just what humanity in all its purity could be. We remember the creation in Genesis, 'in the image of God he created them.' Jesus is not just God's image, he is God. He gave us the pattern of behaviour that humans should strive for. He left us his example and his teaching.

So then all those who call themselves Christians should try to live in Jesus' way.

³ 'And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.'

This may sound impossible but it is what is demanded of us. It is no good saying one thing while doing another. Everyone has to keep on asking, 'What would Jesus do?'

This last verse reminds us of, 'Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God,' so it leads us on beautifully to our Gospel reading from The Sermon on the Mount, the verses known as The Beatitudes.

Our Gospel reading begins, 'When Jesus saw the crowds he went up the mountain.' This passage comes directly after Jesus' temptation in the wilderness and his calling of the disciples. As Jesus travels around preaching and healing we are told great crowds followed him. Here then Jesus takes his disciples with him away from the crowds and he teaches them. The Sermon on the Mount is very long; in Matthew it covers chapters five, six and seven, so it is likely that this is not one sermon but actually a collection of the teachings of Jesus.

The Beatitudes are the famous sayings, they follow a similar pattern for eleven verses. They are so famous and we have heard them so often I wonder if you have ever tried to analyse the meaning of each one. It is well worth doing that. They look deceptively simple but they are anything but.

Those who live in the way of The Beatitudes are, says Jesus, near to 'the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom values here on earth. These are the ways that will be brought to fruition at God's new creation. Jesus teaches this when he gives his disciples the prayer we say each day, 'Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' 'Hallow' means 'holy' All Hallows Eve is the evening before All Hallows –All Saints, the holy ones of God.

Jesus is not just a great teacher and a good man giving advice for life. Jesus is God incarnate, bringing God's Good News and the new way for people on the earth. Jesus, the Messiah will come again to judge the earth at the new creation which God will bring to fruition. Those who live by the teachings in The Beatitudes are already living the way of God, the way of the kingdom. They are mirroring the way of Jesus who came to earth, the pattern for us all.

If we look at v 11 it is stark reality, these first these Christians were being persecuted for their beliefs. They were prepared to die rather than renounce their belief in Jesus. Indeed Matthew was writing at a time when persecution was rife. The Good News of Jesus, his new command, 'Love one another as I have loved you' was completely countercultural; it was not the meek who inherited the earth. The strong, the powerful and the selfish would do that. Those spoken of in The Beatitudes will be inheritors of the new creation though. The teaching of Jesus was not the 'normal' way of life. He turned normal values upside down, this was a new way. Jesus was not the avenging warrior Messiah, he came in God's name, the God of love. Those who followed him had to be prepared to die for him as indeed so many Christians do today.

This is God's new way, God's Good News, these are the kingdom values lived out on earth, these will be perfected in his new creation. The saints lived their lives according to the way of Jesus, often they gave their lives because of it, but they were doing what Jesus requires of all of us.

Seeing the Beatitudes as Good News like this makes things clearer. When Jesus says, 'Blessed are the merciful for they will obtain mercy' this is what is taught in our Lord's Prayer. 'Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.' God is our loving Father but we must repent of our sins, and forgive others if we expect to receive forgiveness. Mercy is a central Christian virtue; it goes hand in hand with love.

'Blessed are the peacemakers,' notice Jesus says peacemakers – it is an active thing - that is those who seek for peace. It is not just an absence of trouble. I have heard people say they did nothing, 'for peace's sake.' That is not the way of Jesus, he was never afraid to speak out against what was wrong. It was not being silent that took Jesus to Calvary. He always stood up for what was right and we are called to do the same. It is only by doing this, by standing against injustice and oppression and wrong doing that true peace, the peace of God, can be established.

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness,' if you are truly hungry or thirsty you crave to assuage it. That I think is what Jesus means when he is referring to those people who fix their eyes on God's way and try to live it out. This is not false righteousness like the Pharisees, it is purity of belief.

Jesus begins each by saying, "Blessed are". Those who live as Christians, sincerely practising Christ's teachings, know that joy and bliss, the joy of being a Follower of The Way. It is not divorced from trouble, anything but; being a Christian is not easy as he makes clear but they receive great joy which is a gift of God.

The Beatitudes, The Sermon on the Mount are in a way the Good News of God in a nutshell. Jesus is the pattern of this way of life, the life of humanity he came to share.

We are called to try each day to really be 'Followers of the Way,' to examine our actions by the example and teachings of Jesus. To ask ourselves are we pure in heart? What are our motives? Are they God centred or self-centred or a bit of a mix? Purity of heart means being totally God centred. That is not having your head in the clouds – anything but, Jesus was right there in the mud and poverty of life. It means living in this world following Jesus.

No one is perfect, the saints lived out these teachings to the best of their ability in their lives and we are the saints who have Jesus' commission and promise to 'turn from sin and turn to Christ.' We are human, we will stumble and fail but we just need to keep trying, to keep aiming for these standards as our goal. To put it another way (though not politically correct) 'A man's reach should exceed his grasp or what's a heaven for.'

The Beatitudes, indeed all Christ's teachings, are rooted and grounded in fact, in reality; they are not in any way airy fairy. We are living in a time of difficulty and uncertainty, a time of fear and of hardship for many people. We are called to be there for them. Many of us cannot do that physically but we can pray and we can give generously. Nearer to home we can be aware of the needs of others, even a telephone call or a chat can turn a lonely person's day around. We are called on to show compassion, to care sincerely, that is the way of Jesus.

In the same way Jesus is always there for us, walking alongside us, we only have to call on him in prayer.

'The Lord who left the heavens, our life and peace to bring, to dwell in lowliness with us, our pattern and our king.' John Keble

