Year A
All Saints
Revelation 7:9-end
1 John 3:1-3
Matthew 5:1-12

On Friday evening we were treated to a great lecture by Professor William Whyte on this building, how it has been used and changed since it was built to say something about what the people who gathered here believed that they were doing. If you missed it let me recommend you watching it. Beforehand, as I was chatting to him, I discovered that amongst many other things Professor Whyte chairs the blue plaque committee for London, you'll be familiar with the plaques that say here lived or stayed X. It was fascinating hearing the process from initial suggestions by the public or others through to historical research, and final discussion, does this person deserve a plaque here, is there enough to connect them to this place? One of my current books on the go is the life of St Philip Neri, who founded the original congregation of the oratory in the 16th Century. It's less of a biography and more of a hagiography, it is designed to tell the miracles and good deeds that are worthy of his canonisation, his being made a saint, the blue plaque of those who have gone before us in the faith.

Yes, of course, the Church has a process, and quite a convoluted one, for proclaiming saints. If it didn't how would we go about it? Would we advertise for vacant saint's posts? Would there be a nomination system? Who would be on the committee and how would they decide? It seems to me most of the

saints we remember were either almost too good to be true or people we would avoid for being very strange. And if there was such a process, who would you nominate?

It's easy on a feast day such as this to think that we have gathered to think about other people, that this is a day about others not us. Particularly so with the Beatitudes. This is the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, the first of Matthew's five great teaching blocks. We see Matthew at work presenting Jesus as being in the line of Moses but greater than Moses with the location of the mountain and the giving of a new Law. Each beatitude has its background in the Old Testament, in the wisdom and prophetic literature.[1] Unsurprisingly, there has been quite a lot of debate about whether the beatitudes are ethical, showing us how we should live now, or whether they are purely eschatological, showing us what the fulness of God's kingdom looks like in the future. And because Jesus speaks in generalities, "the meek", "the merciful', "the peacemakers', it's easy to think that these are some nameless premier league of disciples, after all we only get specifically name checked at the end when Jesus moves onto being persecuted!

[1] Daniel Harrington SJ, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p.79

And yet Matthew is quite clear that Jesus calls **all** his disciples to him, not just a select few, and that probably most of the crowd heard him too. The inconvenient truth of the beatitudes is that they all apply to all of us! They are both ethical and eschatological, they have a meaning now and in the future.

Now they belong to all of us because they primarily spell out the character of God and not the Christian. God is all these things and behaves in all these ways, and because God behaves in the ways that God does, a person would be foolish to not act in the way the Beatitudes recommend. To be blessed as the beatitudes say we can be means to be like Jesus. "To be a disciple of Jesus is to be assimilated in him, to be grafted into him, to become part of God's plan for the perfecting of sinful human nature. Heaven means that the reality of God's perfect love in Jesus Christ will become a reality for all humanity."[2]

That is the nowness of the beatitudes, that they point us to Jesus, they point us to the life and operation of the Triune God. Mercy, peace righteousness, humility, mourning for what is not are all found at the heart of the Mystery of

[2] Fleming Rutledge, *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ*, p.104

God. If our lives are fashioned on that then they too will point to God in the person of Jesus Christ.

Which is essentially exactly what saints do, they point to Jesus by being like him; Gerard Manley Hopkins the Jesuit poet-priest wrote in his poem *The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we Breathe*, of Mary, "who / this one work has to do - / Let all God's glory through." Rowan Williams has written that saints are just normal human beings who let God shine through them. And how does light shine? It shines through the cracks, through the gaps, through the broken bits. We don't have to be perfect to be saints, we don't even have to be whole and have everything together. Even in our brokenness we can let God shine through.

But the beatitudes also acknowledge that all is not as it should be. They follow a pattern that includes both the present and the future tense: "Blessed are the … for they will be …". The future tense, the eschatological, confesses that the world is not currently as the Beatitudes describe it. But it will be someday! The use of the present tense implies, not only that the future reign of God is guaranteed but also that it is already real. Through the life, death, and

resurrection of Jesus Christ, its presence can already be felt and seen in the world.

That's the message of John in his letter too. Already we are children of God, right here, right now, you and I are children of God because of what Jesus has done for us. What we will be has not yet been made known, there is more to come! But we are connected intimately with the Divine now, here, because God has made us beloved, has made us blessed, now. Here in the now and the not yet we are saints. And what awaits us is too much for us to take in.

That's partly why we struggle so much with Revelation. We are on safer ground here with our passage this morning, it's clearly about the worship of heaven, the innumerable number of saints (in the chapter before it was only 144,000) before God. And yet that's not quite it either, this passage is clearly Theocentric, God is on the throne, that is where our attention is being focused. It is the work of God in bringing these saints into the kingdom that is on display. "The inclusion of the whole earth in the promise of salvation was only the latest surprise in the long history of a God who makes unlikely choices and does new things. Even the heavenly hosts who attend God's throne do not foresee the breadth of God's grace, as an exasperated Jonah did

[just a few weeks ago] 'I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.'"[3]

Even in heaven the saints point to God, and on earth even the reluctant ones like Jonah do too. This is a day that lends itself to reflection on the distinction and connection between the church militant and the church triumphant. We have communion not only with our contemporaries, as we struggle together in the midst of a broken world, our fellow saints in Ukraine, in Gaza and the West bank, in Israel, in Russia, in America; we also commune with the saints who have gone before us and have received their eternal rest. The saints triumphant bear witness both to the faith that the God of Jesus Christ is the true ruler of the universe and to a way of living that suits such a Lord. The saints provide a glimpse of God's already in the midst of our not-yet.

But All Saints' is more than just remembering all those in the Church that have died. It is remembering those saints lovingly as the people who made our faith possible. Who kept believing in hope and resurrection and grace and Jesus and taught our grandparents, our parents, and then us to do the same.

[3] Christpher B Hays, *Feasting on the Word Year A: volume 4*, p.221

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Some of the saints have names to us — our mothers, grandfathers, fathers, grandmothers, aunts, uncles, siblings, spouses, loved ones, and dear friends. They weren't perfect. Far from it. In fact, some of them may have done tremendous good *or* tremendous harm, and for most of them, the record was mixed. In truth, we are all both saint and sinner. Each of them, however, shaped the church into what we are today. Their smiles, their eyes, their voices stay with us because they shaped us. Even long after they die, the saints are with us.

Today is the day that we remember and give thanks for them all. We think of our loved ones as part of the heavenly throng, gathered around Christ's table. For just a moment, today in the assembly, we imagine heaven and earth are joined, the rose window in reality

And then we think about the work of bringing some of the not yet into the now, making God's kingdom visible and present. Righteousness, peace, mercy, holiness, these are the things that we are called to in our own lives, and we need to demonstrate them in our own lives before we can demand them of

others. Because you and I are also saints, part of the present worldwide communion of saints, called to live out the attributes God shows.

You are the saints of God, never let anyone tell you otherwise or make you feel otherwise. You are the saints that God has called in this place, at this time, as you. God has called you in all your beauty and with all your flaws, and through the Spirit can make you better than you are. God has called you in your brokenness and wholeness to let the light of God's mercy and grace to shine through. God has called you saints to open the window on God's love and forgiveness to those so desperately looking. So, with all the saints who have gone before us, those we have known and those we haven't, and with all the saints now, and with all the saints who will come after let us continue to work for the kingdom of God, in our own lives, in our community, and in our world. If we yearn to see peace and reconciliation, justice and equity, and truth then it must start with us as God's children.

Try this this week, put the word Saint before your name, remind yourself who you and whose you are and go be saints, letting God's work shine through you rejoicing that you are beloved and blessed.