

**Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2014 All Saints Day Rev.7. vv 9-end. Matt 5. 1-12**

Traditionally, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> November are All Saints and All Souls days respectively. Today we celebrate both with a special All Souls service this evening. When we talk about *Saints*, probably we think immediately of Apostles and Martyrs of the early Church, of those who professed their faith often in the face of opposition, of missionaries persecuted abroad, and of men and women whose lives were marked by special service or sacrifice. These people one thinks of traditionally as Saints. But in the biblical sense Saint refers to all God's Holy people: communities of the faithful, church members, disciples of X't. *We are all called to be saints. All called to God's service.*

And let's take encouragement from this: these people who we call saints are not superstars, superhuman nor even, many of them, heroes. One might say they are gloriously flawed human beings who have found the gift of God's amazing grace to be sufficient to redeem their weaknesses and to turn them into strengths. They don't seek to impress. They don't need to because they are busy trying to *express* the love of God that's made them who and what they are.

Today's reading in Revelations offers a glorious image of a huge company of the faithful, coming from every nation, standing before the throne of Heaven. They are those who have withstood great hardship but now stand victorious. Robed in the white of purity, waving palm branches – one thinks of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Who are they? A senior angel asks. And the answer comes saying in effect that these are they who have *faithful* through the ordeal of persecution and now they are being welcomed into the presence of God. Christ will be their shepherd and tears of suffering will be wiped away.

And what for *us*, then, believers, people of faith, people *called* to be saints and, yes, flawed human beings. What may we hope for in the hererafter? Our hymns are so full of pictures of heaven and our liturgy of the language of eternity, it's easy enough to assume a heavenly destiny is ours by right. But is it? When young and told that when someone had died they'd gone to heaven, I remember well lying in bed at night wondering how they found their way there. Yes, how, indeed?

We are nearing the end of what is rather disconcertingly called Ordinary Time in the Church Year, a time without festival, during which the Gospel readings have centred on Christ's teaching and preaching and on the Kingdom of Heaven. What better reading to have at the end of this time than the Beatitudes in the Gospel for today; words dwelling not so much on the necessary qualifications, as it were, for entry into that Kingdom of Heaven, as the blessings which the Kingdom will bring to those who meet them.

The Beatitudes are not easy to grasp; they can seem a reversal of the fortunes of the *haves* and *have nots*. But remember Jesus was addressing two kinds of people living in two different worlds. One was concerned only with material things, security, prestige, self-advancement. Jesus threatened them spiritually and materially. Others were from a different sort of society, those for whom the going was harder and whose qualities maybe were overlooked because they didn't push themselves into the limelight. The Beatitudes were pertinent to them not because hardship and misfortune are virtues but because their hearts and minds more readily turned towards the Kingdom, where true happiness and true riches were to be found and for this they were blessed.

As we stand here on this Feast Day, we celebrate countless generations of faithful men and women who have been baptised, confirmed, married and laid to rest here. Many thousands who themselves have been indifferent to worldly prestige, lived lives of faith and sought to share with others the love of God. One of these was Viera Gray, known to many of us here.

It is almost 20 years since our inner glass porch door was engraved with the Tree of Life and dedicated to Viera, a Deacon of St Mary's, someone who devoted herself to serving others and sharing with them the love of God. One who derived from life great fulfilment and joy. Viera was to all of us who knew her someone who carried about her person an unquestionable saintliness. I've talked to many since her death, both churchgoers and non churchgoers and each in his or her own way has alighted on qualities which point to a person who lived very close to God. She devoted her life to others, almost literally. Seriously but joyfully.

Our residential home in Barnes which was built in her memory and bears her name is likewise devoted to loving service of others, our frail and elderly. Viera was, in the words of Juergen Simonson our rector at the time, *a saint who lived and worked among us*. She was deeply loved in this community so let us renew our thanks for her life and work as we celebrate All Saints Day.

*Joy* – which she had in abundance - is, I feel, such an integral part of one whom we regard as a saint. Surely no doom-mongers or killjoys they! Christians are not to be weighed down by sadness and those whose lives have been guided by the Holy Spirit will, we believe, experience the richness, blessedness and joy of a relationship which cannot be severed even in the direst of circumstances.

While I like to think of Saints as ordinary people, they do have to be *extraordinary* too; these diverse personalities who despite their failings were yet able to recognise the limitations of their earthly existence, respond to a power beyond & outside themselves, and set their minds on things of heaven. These are they we celebrate today, that great Communion of Saints, all who were *or are* guided by God, living & dying in faith.

A rich collection of hymns for All Saints can be enjoyed at this time:

*O, what their joy and their glory must be, Those endless Sabbaths the blessed ones see* go the opening lines of a hymn written in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

And:

*Who are these, like stars appearing, These before God's throne who stand? Each a golden crown is wearing. Who are all this glorious band?*

*These like priests have watched and waited, Offering up to Christ their will*

*Soul and body consecrated, Day and night to serve him still.*

*Now in God's most holy place, Blest they stand before his face.*

Amen