

29 October 2017

Preacher: Jennifer Smith

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Hymns:     **177**   **“Lo, he comes with clouds descending”**  
              **745**   **“For all the saints”**  
              **611**   **“Brother, Sister let me serve you”**  
              **470**   **“Lord, for the years”**

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Readings:   **Revelation 7:9-17**  
              **Matthew 5.1-12**

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Revelation 7.9-17

Matthew 5.1-12

First Address: What is a saint?

Friends, we are here keeping the feast of All Saints, that moment in the church year much beloved of John Wesley, when we remember the saints, signs of God’s kingdom. But what is a saint?

I mean, I know the big ones who get plaster statues and tealights lighting in front of them and churches named after them – but what about the ordinary saints? We will hear Jesus talk about them as ‘blessed’ in the Gospel, mysterious as ever, and we will hear the author of the Revelation talk about them in heaven.

Friends, once light has left its source, we see it only reflected off other things – usefully, for instance, when it shows us where not to step! Last night when we were having our young people’s all hallows party, we had glow sticks in the garden marking where sweets were hidden in the dark – we who have lived a little know we are not always that lucky.

A saint is simply someone whose life – both rocky and smooth bits - reflects the light of God. I am looking at some right now. The light reflecting from the lives of the saints mark our way – the lives of the saints reflect the light of Jesus, and give praise to his name.

We are going to call on some of them now, asking them to stand beside us.

## **“For all the saints”**

When I think of ordinary saints, I think of the woman called Nancy Langstaff, who taught me to read. She had short hair, and was close to retirement when I came into her kindergarten class in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

She was a Quaker, and believed in radical equality – hence she insisted we called her by first name – it was the 1970s. And she had no illusions about the capacity of small children for chaos – she ran a tight ship!

Nancy would gather the class around a piece of blue carpet for a few minutes quiet time. And if we wanted to, we might say a sentence into the quiet, to share what we were thinking about with the group.

We did speak – all wanting to please Nancy, who sat pacifically cross-legged at the head of the circle: 'I am thinking of a pretty flower,' or 'I am thinking about clouds.' And she would nod encouragement.

But the one that made Nancy really smile, and I remember it – was a little boy who could never sit still - 'I am thinking about a monster robot smashing up a city with big feet and teeth!'

'Thank you,' Nancy beamed – thank you for sharing what was really in your head, instead of what you thought you ought to say.'

Salutary lesson, for our reception year then, and us now, we saints of God who gather here this morning. A saint is a sign of the kingdom of heaven. Not a perfect person, not someone without flaws, or who always fits with everyone else, but simply someone who reflects the light of Christ to show us the way.

Today I want to consider the feast of All Saints – in such a way as help us to reconcile our history, prepare us for heaven, and yes – equip us for our living today. You could think of this as looking backward, looking forward, and looking Godward.

First, looking backward. A few minutes ago we stood together and called on the memory of those who have gone before us in the litany – we called on them to stand beside us. Those guardians of truth – those good, those disagreeable, those opinionated, those passionate, those sometime prophets – holy ones, forebears in grace.

Some in our litany set out to make history. And some had history made across the record of their broken bodies. Those saints. And we are here for all of them – they are our inheritance, and stand as signs of the kingdom in our common memory.

Did you know all the names in our litany? I did not, at first!

But reading the record of the gathering of the saints in the Revelation, I don't expect to know them all: listen to what the text says – they come from all tribes and peoples and languages – hear the awe, in the voice of the speaker in the Revelation, as he sees the great multitude that is gathered at the foot of the throne.

So we have the 13<sup>th</sup> century Robert Grosseteste –Oxford scholar of Hebrew and Arabic, and Bishop of Lincoln.

Grosseteste was celebrated as a defender of the Jews of Lincoln. After his death in 1253 many were arrested and executed; the Jews were expelled from England their business and holdings seized, in 1290. Robert Grosseteste, not perfect, but a saint of God and remembered by the church.

And then we have Mary Slessor, with fiery red hair, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Scotswoman who abandoned her early missionary reserve to live among the ordinary people in Calabar in what is now the extreme southeastern tip of Nigeria, she ate the food and spoke the language – it is said she was never very successful making converts, but she worked over a generation to end the practice of letting twins die at birth for fear that one harboured an evil spirit – she adopted and saved many, and is still honoured both in Calabar, and in Scotland where her face is on the 10£ note. She lived until 1915.

Mary Slessor, an ordinary person, not perfect, but a saint of God and remembered by the church.

And what of Nathaniel Gilbert, who brought Methodism to Antigua in 1759, or the three slaves, Maria, Sophie, and Bessie whom he had brought with him – what do you think they made of the grey London winter of 1758? John Wesley met them in January of that year, in Wandsworth, and testified to their faith – as evidence of the Gospel for all nations and peoples. Surely we should remember them alongside Nathaniel Gilbert. All the saints, and all of the saints.

We have said the saints are folk whose lives reflect the light of Christ. It isn't just the good bits - their lives and relationships in all their complexity reflect light to show us where to step – and where not to - not because they are perfect or their world was without sin, but because God has loved them and uses their lives as signs to show us the way, where to step and where not to - we who stand at the remove of history.

Perhaps, just perhaps - in thinking of all the saints, and all of the saints, we have a gentle lesson in how to handle the truth of our own sinful history, to negotiate how to hold it as we walk together towards God's future? Not simply on the one hand to airbrush our historical sin out of memory, forgetting that Nathaniel Gilbert was a slaveholder, for instance - or either to reject it all because of its sin – but to redeem it by telling the truth about it and living our repentance today?

Because we pray every day, 'thy kingdom come, on earth as in heaven.' And friends, God answers prayer.

Remember, the author of the Revelation saw saints from the many tribes and nations gathered at the throne. Not all known to him, not all like him, nor familiar. But united in that they have come through suffering – to the time of protection, God has guided them to '...springs of the water of life, ...every tear is wiped away.'

Friends, in case you missed it, this passage is about heaven. And the author of the Revelation, who is recounting his dream, marvels to report how many strange and various peoples are there! Exactly NOT whom we or he expects. At All Saints, we look backwards.

Now, let's turn and look at what kind of future we might live in, we who remember the saints.

Because we do not teach that we have to wait for heaven until we die – no more than that we would teach you should sit by a river and remain thirsty or that a poor person should sit and remain poor in a society that is rich.

We teach that we live in the gap between the 'now' of the world and the 'not yet' of God's perfect kingdom. It's not just that we are to act in ways to bring the 'not yet' closer, but that we expect to catch glimpses of it in each other's lives – heaven is alongside us already. Right now, just as we are.

In the beatitudes Jesus looks forward to give some more description of that future for the ones he calls 'blessed' – this is the very beginning of the sermon on the mount.

In his words today, the Beatitudes - we don't get a to do list for sainthood – goodness knows it takes no special effort to be poor in spirit, hungry, or full of grief – and God save us from the day we are.

But rather, here is a way of living which is an alternative narrative to the one we write on our CV, our passport application, our statement for a court, our tax form (don't forget Tuesday's paper deadline), or in any of the other ways we are taught to account for ourselves. Here is an alternative history, a future you can choose to claim – and, one that allows for the depth of our history to be redeemed.

This is a sacrificial way. It is a way that is deeply personal but not private, not about individuals all making their own heaven but one heaven in which we all have a part. Jesus' words point towards the vision of heaven in the Revelation, and the journey to get there goes by way of our lives - And it is mysterious – surely we know the meek do not inherit the earth – in the main they get stepped on an abused, unless fortunate to have protection of money or status.

The Saints live in a world still full of confusion and illness, difficulty and half starts.

So having looked backwards, and forwards – we look Godward – how are we to live in the present?

How, for the sake of all the saints – especially those trodden on or forgotten - will we be signs?

Some of us will do it as parents. Some not. Some of us by loving, some by standing alongside, some by secret acts of kindness. Some by shouting awkwardly from rooftops – the kind of prophets we respect, but sigh over on committees. Some of us by taking risks by changing job or life direction, or risks by persevering in relationship. Some of us, by being the first person of colour in a workplace. Or the last one to leave until a job, way after closing time, until is finished.

Some of us become signs of the kingdom by concerted action – by training and walking the streets as politicians or pastors. Some by making art, or writing words or healing bodies or teaching. Some of us do simply by enduring another day.

Your lives are signs of the coming kingdom as much as those other saints in light – for the sake of *all* the saints, we will be signs. And maybe, maybe as we look backwards with the full compassion of God on the lives of the saints, and forwards to the day when every tear will be

reconciled – maybe we can come to see our own lives with that same compassion? To turn from our sin and be redeemed?

Remember, the great multitude gathered were unified not by being perfect, but by having come through the tribulation to the place of God's protection.

So join the company – join with Sarah and Hagar, Joseph and Moses. With Catherine of Siena and Bessie of Antigua. Forgetting not in the memory of many here, Donald Soper and Pauline Webb.

Receive your inheritance, see the lives of the saints gone before, grasp the vision of the future, and delight with those who are among us. And for heaven's sake see your own life with the same compassion with which God sees you.