

30/10/11 All Saints. Matthew 5:1-12. Revelation 7:9-17.

In his letter to the Romans, recognised to be one of his greatest epistles, St.Paul opens his letter with greetings and a brief summary of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He sends these greetings and his acclamation to, and I quote, "...all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints." Well, tomorrow is Hallowe'en and Tuesday is All Saints Day. This great festival has been transferred to this Sunday, and so today we are celebrating All Saints.

I want to go back though to that opening greeting by St.Paul, "...all who are in Rome, beloved of God, CALLED TO BE SAINTS." He could very well be writing his letter to us, to all who are in Biggin Hill, beloved of God, called to be saints! So what is a SAINT? The traditional picture which is summed up by this word is of someone whose life has been marked out by holiness, by an obvious closeness to God, whose life has been exemplary, whose character and example is of one who closely followed in the footsteps of Christ. We could mention the names of many beginning with St.Paul himself, St.Peter and the other apostles of our Lord, to St.Augustine, St.Francis of Assissi, and to more modern saints like Mother Theresa of Calcutta. Yes, they are all numbered amongst the many individuals down the ages who have striven to live a life modelled upon that of our Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, many of them have so closely and intimately identified with His life and example that they have even found their mortal bodies marked by the "stigmata", the sacred signs of Christ's crucifixion, in their hands, feet, head and side. When we think of these people we look at the way our lives are and the way we live our own lives, and we tend to see a very poor and mediocre comparison with them and with Christ. None of us, I'm sure, would like to think that we would have to become martyrs for the Christian faith, or would have to live the life of an ascetic, a monk or a nun, or abandon our way of life and become another Mother Theresa. And yet in a strange kind of way that IS what SOME of us are called to.

In our gospel reading this morning, we hear yet again those familiar words from the Beatitudes which begin 'blessed are those'. But where have we heard that word 'blessed' before. Surely it's a word used to describe a saint or someone who is being or has been made a saint. But here Jesus is addressing the crowds, those ordinary people of goodwill who are following Him, who find Jesus interesting and worthy of being listened to

and being taught by Him. People like you and me! And so, I'd like to take each of these Beatitudes this morning and see how they relate to us.

Firstly, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit.' We would all like to be regarded as spiritual giants wouldn't we? But the likes of Billy Graham, John Wesley, Martin Luther King, Pope Paul II, Mother Teresa are all far out of sight as spiritual individuals and examples to us all. And yet, Christ says that those who are poor in spirit - spiritually poor - are actually blessed! This I believe is because if you are a follower of Jesus and you recognise within yourself that your spirituality has still a way to grow, then you are on the path to sainthood and as, Jesus puts it, the Kingdom of heaven belongs to you. Now I personally feel very heartened by that, for I find in my own spiritual struggles, the seeds of hope that perhaps indeed I AM going in the right direction. It is still a struggle but one which is worth it, for the prize is the Kingdom of heaven. I can remember many years back now, the head of the Roman Catholic church then in England, Cardinal Heenan, a great spiritual man of his day being asked the question, "What is the one thing that is most important to you and to God in your spiritual life?" His answer was simple, "The saving of my eternal soul." Now that might seem like a trite, even selfish and inward looking attitude, but if you think about it, it really is THE most important aspiration and responsibility we each have before God and every committed Christian. As St.Paul puts it in his first letter to the Corinthians chapter 9 where he compares the Christian life with a running race. He says, "Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize?" And a couple of verses later he says, "Therefore I run thus; not with uncertainty. Thus I fight; not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified." Paul took his own spirituality, his life's work of following in the footsteps of Christ extremely seriously. We must make sure that we too are on the right road acknowledging Jesus Christ as our own personal Saviour and trying in our lives to follow Him.

Next is the Beatitude, "Blessed are those who mourn." The loss of a loved one is probably THE most critical and traumatic thing that can happen to any person in the whole of their lives. Don't listen to those who say, "Never mind, time will heal" because it simply doesn't! Time will slowly accommodate the heartache, the trauma, the hurt, the pain of losing someone who you dearly loved, but a scar will always remain. The pain will slowly reduce, but it seldom goes away completely. But Christ has not only told us that those who mourn will be comforted, but He has demonstrated

it. In His own death and resurrection, He has shown us that there is more to this life than meets the eye, for there is a true and wonderful life beyond this one if we will only trust Him. It is a life which is transformed, a life with God, an eternal and everlasting life of happiness with those we have loved and lost awhile. We shall be affirming this in our All Souls service here at St.Marks this afternoon. Christ came back from death to confirm this to us and to His disciples who were transformed by the experience. Yes, those who mourn are truly blessed if only they put their trust in God and in His eternal good and loving purposes for them and for those for whom they mourn.

Next we have the Beatitude, "Blessed are the meek." This is probably the most wrongly interpreted saying amongst all of Jesus' teachings. Many think that being meek is being weak. But this is not the right interpretation of this beatitude. To be meek is to be gentle and lowly, humble, unassuming, self-deprecating, but certainly not weak. No one could have been more humble than Jesus Himself. Born in a lowly cattle-shed, away in a manger as the carol puts it. Brought up in obscurity, in Galilee, a part of Israel scorned by the more intellectual southern Jews. Remember that scornful question put to Philip by Nathaniel, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" To model oneself upon Jesus is to adopt an attitude of humility. He was not aggressive or pushy, greedy or proud. The best interests and the good of others always came first. No, being meek is not being weak. Look at Christ's righteous anger as He surveyed the misuse of the Temple in Jerusalem and then turned over the tables of the moneychangers and those selling doves and animals. He was no weak-kneed individual. The carpenter from Nazareth was used to dealing with rough, tough fishermen, farmers and builders - the earthy artisans of Palestine. He was present amongst the people in gentleness but also in strength. Meekness is another mark of blessedness, of sainthood.

Then we have the Beatitude, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness". I have mentioned this word righteousness before in one of my previous sermons. It means "being in a right relationship with God". In our gospel reading last Sunday, a lawyer, one of those seeking to catch our Lord out with cunning questions, asked Him, "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment of the Law?" Jesus reply was, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." It seems that nowadays respect for God or even for religion of any sort is becoming less and less. In society in general, the place of the Almighty, as He Who should always be put first, is slowly diminishing and the

primary place of the Christian religion in our country is slowly being eroded. Eric in his mid-week sermon last week, suggested two ways in which the place of God has been pushed aside in everyday life. No longer is a prayer said before Borough Council meetings because they wish to retain political correctness, that such a Christian prayer might upset the sensibilities of other religions. And in many schools now, the morning assembly for all the children, with prayers said and hymns sung, is no longer an automatic part of the beginning of each day. The greatest service that we can do for Christ and for the Christian religion is to live the Christian life in our homes, at work and in our neighbourhood, in every aspect of our lives. In other words, to walk day by day and hour by hour knowing that God is at our side and to witness to Almighty God at every opportunity. We need to hunger for this 'right relationship with God'. If we do, then we are heading for sainthood.

The next three Beatitudes could be combined, for they are all aspects of the same thing. "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy". This teaching is actually an extension of the Lord's prayer. Later on in His ministry Jesus taught His disciples how to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." It is fundamental to our Christian faith that if we are not prepared to forgive others, then we ourselves should not expect to be forgiven. In fact, when Jesus was asked how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times? His reply was, "I do not say to you up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven." In other words, you should keep on trying to forgive! It's easy isn't it to find fault with others, especially if they fail or offend us? We criticize and pick fault so readily. But it's not so easy to see and to acknowledge the potential good in others, but that is what we are really asked to do. Ultimately, giving others, especially those we consider worthless, another chance, and indeed encouraging them and helping them can often lead to surprising results. We all know the story of the ugly duckling. Hidden within that ugly exterior was something quite beautiful waiting to emerge. We need to be patient and forbearing, for within each and every one of us there lurks an angel! And this particular beatitude leads on to the next one which is "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." Human hearts which are really pure not only see God, but can see God in others. A pure heart, a holy heart is what all Christian believers should aspire to. It is the holy person, a person who is wholesome if you like, who has a pure and unstained heart - the heart of a saint. I'm sure we could all point to at least one person we know who is like that. And of course such people are

natural peacemakers - "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." It is a logical extension of the character of someone who is merciful and who is pure in heart, that they should be natural peacemakers. People whose presence and love and care pours oil on troubled waters.

And finally, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness". Our own "right relationship to God" will inevitably bring us into conflict with those who oppose Him. There are many Christians in our world today imprisoned, tortured, isolated, disenfranchised, even killed for their faith. Probably the worst that we might suffer for our allegiance to Christ is perhaps the ridicule of those who should know better. Thank heavens that we in this country have freedom to worship and practice our faith without the fear of persecution. This reminds us however that we need to pray regularly for our Christian brothers and sisters who have to live in fear and who suffer for their faith. Remember, it has always been recognised that the seeds of the church are in the blood the martyrs. So give thanks that there are those prepared to go through such trials and tribulations for their Christian beliefs.

We are all called to be holy, in other words to be 'saints' and the task facing us is rather like climbing a mountain. Some folk have gone before us, and have at last reached the summit, after many a struggle, or disappointment, or even a fall. These we remember and give thanks for at this time of All Saints. The higher we climb, the nearer WE get to the summit. But there are dangers in mountain-climbing. Climbers are often roped together so that the one who is in advance and on a firm footing, can help those coming on behind. The Communion of Saints both on earth and in heaven is like that rope, and they help us on our spiritual way. Even though each climber must rely on their own muscle and skill, they also need the help and encouragement of their companions. And that's what membership and the fellowship of the Church of God is for. But even then, to reach the summit that is holiness or blessedness in God, it's not enough just to have skill and the help of others. We all need, first and foremost, the grace of God given to us in the Holy Spirit. Amen.