

Sermon for 6.11.16 All Saints Day

Today we celebrate All Saints day and for this church, today is also our patronal festival for all the saints are our patrons. "We are surrounded by them – by a great cloud of witnesses".

At St Matthews's church, images in the stained glass windows surround us with God's witnesses.

When we recall the saints who have gone before us, we affirm in faith our belief in the salvation of Christ, and our conviction that the church is part of the larger reality the "communion of Saints".

In the reading from Ephesians this morning, we hear that through our belief in Christ we are marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit. In the letter Paul prays for us to be empowered with the eyes of our hearts, enlightened in hope, in riches and in greatness according to the working of God's great power in Christ. All very positive.

By the example of the Saints we know that this is all possible. They witness to the fact that we can live out the call of our baptism – live as a disciple of Christ, fight the good fight, finish the race, and keep the faith.

On this day before all else we glorify God for the faithfulness of the saints, and most of all for God's faithfulness to the saints. We also commemorate the holy ones known only unto God and those of the less distant past, our own loved ones.

The feast of All Saints is therefore an especially personal celebration as many of us recall our loved ones, friends, and mentors no longer with us in this world.

Over past weeks in the gospel readings we have been travelling with Jesus toward Jerusalem and the passion of Christ. It's been a rocky road at times when we have been faced with how different his teachings are to the ways of the world, and how his teachings evoke a change of perspective in his followers.

Today we take a step back in gospel time and rest on more level ground. We listen to the sermon that Jesus delivered on the plain just after he had chosen his twelve disciples.

In the sermon Jesus gave his disciples and his entire audience, clear orders as to how his vision of God's work would go forward. Four promises, and four warnings.

Many in his audience would have been used to hearing such codes, for in the book of Deuteronomy there were long lists of blessings for those who obeyed the law and curses for those who didn't. These were part of the covenant between Israel and God.

Jesus now gives them his version for the renewed Israel.

The beatitudes, as we have come to know them, in Luke's gospel are different than those in Matthew's gospel.

In Matthew, Jesus appeared as a typical Jewish teacher reaching out to a Jewish audience.

In Luke, Jesus reaches out to people from outlying provinces – many would have been gentiles. Also people had come not just to hear him, but also to be healed by him.

The tone of the beatitudes in Luke's gospel is also different than to those in Matthew.

One theologian suggests that Matthew's beatitudes are solemn pronouncements that ring with the sound of a rich, deep bell. Luke's on the other hand, are personal promises.

They are insistent, filled with active colourful verbs, the personal pronoun "you" and the word "now", and they do not hesitate to predict the direst calamity if one fails to meet the responsibilities of revelation.

They are followed by the challenge to love in a way that is not selective – but rather includes even ones enemies. Luke knew that if the communities could act on this new rule, they would burst out of the enclosed ancient way of tribalism. In so doing they would strengthen all of their relationships and ensure that they could withstand the challenges ahead of them.

Jesus sums up his teachings in the golden rule, "Do to others as you would have them do to you". This is a principle that governs all of life and Jesus was not the first to proclaim it.

The negative form of this rule was given by a variety of sages in a variety of cultures. For instance the great Hillel, (Doctor of the Law at Jerusalem in the time of King Herod); said to an inquirer, "What is hateful to you do **not** to your neighbour: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary thereof."

Significantly Jesus gives the rule in the positive form, which nobody else seems to have done. It is not enough for him that his followers abstain from acts they would not like done to them. They must be active in well-doing. It is this activity which is the manifestation of sacred power of love– **the only power** that can break through into the world and change things in a way that will triumph over the power of evil in the world.

Down through the ages we have witnessed this sacred power through the way of the saints who reached out universally – beyond the tribal group, and included those even beyond the faith.

Today we give thanks to God for all the saints, the holy ones of long ago and those of our recent past. Those we have **not known** personally and those we have known in our lives and loved in our hearts.

The Lord be with you.