

“Who are these?”

First, let me begin with thanking your rector, Fr. David Garrett, and the Parish of the Cathedral of St. Peter’s for the privilege of being with you and the honour of preaching this evening. Secondly, let me thank St. Peter’s for your outstanding devotion and commitment to the worship of God in and through the liturgy of the Prayer Book wonderfully augmented by such splendid music and all of the other riches that belong to the larger Catholicism of our Anglican tradition. Thirdly, through that, to your kind support of the work and mission of the Prayer Book Society of Canada in its relentless efforts to remind and recall our church to its essential magisterium as found in the Book of Common Prayer. What I purpose this evening is a kind of teaching sermon. I hope that I shall overly try your patience.

The Festival of All Saints in all of its richness and glory provides us with the best if not the only reason to love the Church and a counter to all of the reasons to hate the Church. The vision of the communion of saints is the vocation of our humanity. We are reminded of the forms of our spiritual fellowship that properly define the end and purpose of our lives. In prayer and praise, we participate in that heavenly city and community even now. In the greyness of nature’s year, in the season of scattered leaves and in the culture of scattered souls, we celebrate the spiritual gathering that is our homeland, the homeland of the spirit.

Our evening readings complement the powerful lessons which belong to All Saints’ Day. The lesson from *Revelation* echoes the reading tonight from *Second Esdras* about “*a multitude*” which cannot be numbered who are those who have “*put off mortal clothing and put on the immortal*” and have “*confessed the name of God*”. It is a vision of the confessing Church in its truth and glory. The lesson from *Revelation* expands on the nature of that confession. It is about the praise and worship of “*our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb*”, images that extend the concept of “*the Son of God*” who is “*in their midst*” in *Second Esdras*. It becomes a reference to Christ and to our fellowship in and with Jesus Christ, “*the author and the finisher of our faith*”, as the lesson from *Hebrews* reminds us, a lesson, too, which complements, it seems to me, the rich and powerful Sermon on the Mount centered on *the Beatitudes* which is the Gospel for All Saints’ Day.

“*Who are these?*” *Second Esdras* asks, a question which *Revelation* takes up with even greater intensity. “*What are these which are arrayed in white robes? And whence came they?*” A rhetorical question, it is answered with the profound insight that “*these are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb,*” extending and developing further the idea in *Second Esdras* of having “*put off mortal clothing and put on immortal*”. Somehow it is in and through suffering, not unlike the examples of suffering which the lesson from *Hebrews* enumerates: “*mockings and scourgings,*” being “*chain[ed] and imprison[ed], stoned and sawn in two, killed with the sword, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated, those whom the world was not worthy.*” Quite a list and all

those forms of suffering are drawn into and belong to the sufferings of Christ who “endured the cross, despising the shame”. No glory apart from the litany of suffering.

And that is a hard lesson for our times and yet a most necessary lesson.

“My friends,” the Chorus says at the end of Sophocles’ play, *The Women of Trachis*, “you have seen many strange things: countless deaths, new kinds of torture, immeasurable pain, and all that you’ve seen here is God” (trans. Bryan Doerries). There is nothing here that is not Zeus, to be more precise. “Countless deaths, new kinds of torture, immeasurable pain”, they could be describing the horrors of the last hundred years or so and into our present time. A powerful story, the play belongs to the long tradition of consolation literature, to a litany of works by poets and philosophers, by figures like Plato and Aristotle, Seneca and Cicero, Augustine and Boethius, Dante and Meister Eckhart. Eckhart’s *Book of Divine Consolation* captures something of the wonder of the whole tradition of consolation literature, literature which deals openly and frankly with suffering. That tradition, too, has its counterparts in the other religions of the world such as in the *Bhagavad Gita* of Hinduism or in the Sermons of the Buddha which reflect on different ways of thinking about suffering.

“My suffering is in God”, Eckhart says, even more, “My suffering is God.” It is a provocative insight and one which arrests our attention. It captures powerfully a Christian understanding of suffering. But how are we to make sense of such a statement? At the heart of the Christian understanding of this tradition of consolation literature are the *Beatitudes*. They are at the heart of our All Saints’ tide contemplations. They are about our vocation, our homeward calling to the communion of saints. They signal who we are in Christ, “the author and finisher of our faith”. They are altogether about the qualities or virtues of Christ in us.

The Beatitudes are a wonderful counter to the arrogance and the ignorance of our technocratic world where our dominance and destruction of nature goes hand in hand with our dominance and destruction of one another and of ourselves. Against the forms of our self-annihilation stand these qualities of spiritual perfection, the qualities of the life of Christ in us. This is what we celebrate in the Festival and Octave of All Saints. There is nothing here that is not God and God in us. *The Beatitudes* challenge us about the meaning and purpose of suffering.

The Beatitudes are the blessednesses which is not the same thing as happiness in the contemporary meaning of that word. Happiness for us is something accidental and arbitrary, personal and subjective, a long way from the eudaemonia of Aristotle’s *Ethics* where happiness is the highest good but where the Good is something substantial and objective, a good spiritedness, perhaps. Jesus uses another word, makarios, blessedness. “He opened his mouth and taught them saying, Blessed are ... ye.”

The Beatitudes completely overturn our worldly expectations. “Blessed are the poor in spirit”, they begin. “Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake”, they end.

Yet that beginning and that ending have the same reward, *“for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”*. *The Beatitudes* illustrate precisely who we are in God. But what does it mean to be *“the poor in spirit”*? Surely that runs completely counter to our entitlement culture of endless self-esteem. Precisely. What it means is not to be puffed up with yourself and your endless sense of self-importance because to be full of yourself is to be empty of anything else, without regard for others, for God, and for a proper sense of yourself. To be *“poor in spirit”* is about honest humility, the condition really for all our blessedness because it is about our openness to God. If we are too preoccupied with ourselves and our own doings in the pride of our intentions then we become deadly and destructive. *“Blessed”* then *“are the poor in spirit”*. It is our call to humility.

“Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.” It is a powerful theme that runs through the Gospels especially with respect to the compassion of Christ upon those that are in mourning, such as the widow of Nain, for instance. It is not that there isn't and won't be our suffering for the loss of loved ones. We are often in mourning but we are not to be always mourning. There is more than our loss. There is more than our dying and our death. The Christ who meets us as mourners three times in the Gospels does so not to become just another mourner. There is death to be sure, but there is also resurrection. We are called to be more than mourners. *“They shall be comforted”*.

“Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.” Meek? Isn't that the same as weak? No. Meekness here is about gentleness as opposed to the tyranny of dominance and arrogant aggression which takes and seizes everything in the lust of power, in the will to dominate. To inherit is altogether the opposite of taking things by force, the exact opposite of our dominance of nature and ourselves which is so deadly and destructive. In contrast to what we presume to seize, there is the idea of something given, an inheritance. It means to see the world in a new light, to see the world as God's world which we have inherited as a gift that is to be honoured and respected. Such too is the gentleness of Christ. It is our call to gentleness.

“Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled”. The desire for what is right and true is the desire for God's truth and righteousness. It is not about our self-righteousness but a profound desire for righteousness everywhere. It is what we are to seek and in seeking it find it ultimately fulfilled not in ourselves alone but in God. It is our call to justice and righteousness.

“Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy”. It is the only *Beatitude* that presents us with the paradox of the same as opposed to the paradoxes of difference in all of the other *Beatitudes*. Those who are merciful obtain mercy. It is after all *“twice blest”*, as Shakespeare's Portia so wonderfully puts it, *“it blesseth him that gives and him that takes”*. There is an aspect of equality or justice to mercy; *“mercy seasons justice”*, perfects it. *The Beatitudes* are about the qualities of perfect and perfecting love in us. It is our call to be merciful.

"Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God". Against the distractions, the disorders and the deceits of our hearts, there is the notion of being pure in heart. *"Make me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me"* is our Lenten prayer, a prayer for all times, for only so can there be a clarity of vision as opposed to our being endlessly distracted, chasing after this image and that image, unsettled in ourselves and *"anxious about a multitude of things"*, unfocused and too full of cares. *"For one thing is needful, and Mary hath chosen the better part"* which is about sitting and listening to the words of Jesus. It is the meaning of our Prayer Book liturgy. To be Marian is to be the Church defined by the Word of God. *"Be it unto me according to thy word"*, Mary says, even if that means that *"a sword shall pierce through thine own soul also that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed"*. Our vocation to the communion of saints is about our being known in God. *"For now we see in a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as I am known."* Blessedness indeed. It is our call to purity of heart.

"Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God". To seek peace is to make peace as opposed to war. It begins within our hearts but has to be something which we seek in the world around us. True peace is *"the peace of God which passeth understanding"*. It is the peace which Christ gives and not as the world gives. It is a deeper peace that belongs to our life in Christ and so to our thoughts and actions. It is our call to seek peace.

And finally, *"blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"*. There is nothing pleasant or happy making about being persecuted for what is right and true. This *Beatitude* speaks powerfully to the destructiveness of the past one hundred years or so in a world where power and truth have been so often separated and opposed. Truth speaks to power at the price of persecution by those who do not want to hear the truth for truth is what they have denied. Make no mistake. There will always be the challenge to be clear about what is right. But the greater challenge is to take a stand for what is right in the face of the pressures to go along to get along or in the face of outright oppression. The issue here is to be defined not by power but by truth and righteousness. Such is the kingdom of heaven. It is our call to stand for truth and righteousness.

Counter-culture in so many ways, the *Beatitudes* belong to our culture in Christ, our life in the communion of saints, a company which *"no man can number"* and which embraces our humanity universally considered as composed *"of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues"* and all united in one common enterprise, the worship of God. This is our blessedness. Jesus ends the *Beatitudes* by driving them home to us directly. *"Blessed are ye when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake."* But *"rejoice and be exceeding glad; for great is your reward in heaven."* Such is our vocation.

"Who are these?" Those who suffer and find that our suffering is in God and is God, the God who makes suffering the way to blessedness. Such is the blessedness of the Communion of Saints. It is about who we are in the sight of God and who we seek to

be. It is about our calling, our vocation in and through the tribulations and sufferings of our lives.

“Who are these?”

Fr. David Curry

All Saints' tide

St. Peter's Cathedral, Charlottetown, PEI

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