



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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All Saints: Blessed are...

Revelation 7:2-27 &
St. Matthew 5:1-12

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The Feast of All Saints is one of the oldest holy days on the Christian Calendar. We have evidence of sermons preached on this occasion going all the way back to the Third Century. It took a while for our different communions to settle on dates. The Eastern church still celebrate it on the Sunday after Pentecost, while we celebrate it November 1st. And the purpose of the day has evolved. In those early centuries, the church observed All Saints' Day as a way to commemorate and honour the martyrs—the men and women who stood firm and who, when the time came, took up their crosses and followed Jesus. Just as the enemies of God thought they had silenced Jesus when they crucified him, the enemies of God thought that could silence the gospel witness of those first Christian. But the opposite happened. The blood of the martyrs fertilised the soil of the empire and through their witness, the gospel put down deep roots, growing and spreading, eventually bringing even mighty Caesar to his knees before the cross, confessing his faith in Jesus the Messiah. In the words of our Old Testament lesson from the Wisdom of Solomon, “in the eyes of the foolish they seem to have died” and “in the sight of men they were punished”, but the reality is that their hope was not in vain, “The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will touch them... They will govern nations and rule over peoples, and the Lord will reign over them forever.” Apocryphal that text may be, but it highlights the truth of God's kingdom and its conflict with the world. The

kingdom of God seems upside-down, but only because the values of fallen humanity were upside-down already. It's not an easy thing to follow Jesus and to take up your cross, but the Lord will vindicate his people.

And this is just what Jesus is getting at in our Gospel today from Matthew 5. Blessed are, blessed are, blessed are... nine times Jesus says and each time he connects the blessing with people whose values are right-side up in contrast to the upside-down values of the world. It's language straight from the Lord's covenant with Israel, going all the way back to Abraham. Remember how the Lord call Abraham and promised to bless him, but the point wasn't just to bless Abraham. The point was that Abraham would then be a blessing to the world. Through Abraham, the Lord would reveal himself to a world that had forgotten him, to a world that would, through his people, see his goodness, his grace, his faithfulness, and one day give him glory. Through Abraham and his family, the Lord would remind the world that he will not leave it as it is, broken and fallen. One day he would come himself to set humanity and the rest of his creation to rights, one day he will wipe away sin and death, and with them all the tears. His people were—and still are—the witnesses of his faithfulness to that promise.

Israel mostly failed at that mission. Instead of glorifying the God of Israel, the nations looked at Israel's faithlessness and mocked her God. But there were always some—like the people the Gospels start with—people like Mary and Joseph, Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna. Faithful people, believing people, people with precious little blessing, but still committed to and still longing to see the Lord set this broken world right-side up. It was to them that Jesus came and it was in their midst that the gospel started doing its work. And as people like these gathered around him, Jesus exhorted them. The Lord would not tolerate the faithlessness of Israel

for much longer. The axe was set to the root of the tree. Judgement was coming. The long-awaited age to come, God's great plan to set the world right-side up was about to start unfolding, and here Jesus is saying, “This is how you have a share in it and it starts by forsaking the upside-down ways of the world and following me. It means being the people who will finally witness the Lord's presence with them. It means being the people who will lift the veil on the Lord's new creation to show the nations what it looks like. And so he begins in Matthew 5:3, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Before we go any further, we need to understand what it means to be blessed. It's the Hebrew idea of *shalom*—something so broad, it's hard to nail down exactly, but it's the sense of completeness, and wellness, of peace with God and in the community. It's about being set to rights and living in a community or a world set to rights. That last bit is important. It's not just an individual thing; it's a community thing—a covenantal thing. It goes back to Abraham and to the exodus and to God's creation of a people who would know the blessing of living in his presence and then witness that blessing to the world around them—that they would witness it until the knowledge of the Lord's glory covers the whole world as the waters cover the sea. The very next thing Jesus goes on to preach about after the Beatitudes is being a people who are salt and light to the world. It's another illustration of what it looks like not just to be God's people *in* the world, but to be God's people *for* the world. To be and to live out God's new creation here and now. To be the dawn that drives away the darkness of the long night.

That's what being blessed is about. The people Jesus describes in these blessings are people who are already living the life of the kingdom, even if imperfectly. Their desire is to see the

Lord set his people and his world to rights and they're already living that way. They're prepared for the kingdom—unlike so many others who were still invested in the ways and values of fallen Israel, fallen humanity, and this broken world.

Jesus starts out with the poor in spirit and I can't help but think of Mary. When she finds out that she's going to bear the Messiah—the one who will set everything to rights—what does she do? Instead of the news filling her with pride, it humbles her. She bursts out in song: “My soul doth magnify the Lord...for he hath regarded the *lowliness* of his handmaiden.”

Most people thought that God would usher in his kingdom and set the world to rights by coming like a great warrior-king to the important and the wealthy, to the powerful and politically connected. Instead, he came to a young girl in a backwater village. And people like Mary flocked to Jesus and through them the kingdom of God burst into the world. The humble came in faith and he opened their eyes, healed their diseases, cast out their demons, and forgave their sins. And all the while the powerful and connected, people like the Sadducees, fumed that Jesus was offering forgiveness apart from the temple. The Pharisees fumed that he was healing on the Sabbath and welcoming tax collectors and sinners. But Jesus says that judgement is coming and those who will see the kingdom will not be the powerful or the self-righteous, but those humble enough to recognise the kingdom in Jesus and to follow him.

The rest of the Beatitudes go the same way. Jesus says:

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they

shall receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”
(Matthew 5:4-9)

These don't come out of the blue. All through these sayings, Jesus is drawing from the prophets and, especially, the psalms. He began his ministry preaching in the synagogue in Nazareth with the words of Isaiah: “The Lord anointed me to proclaim good news to the *poor*...to comfort all who *mourn*.” Isaiah was announcing judgement on Israel and so was Jesus. But those who mourn the sins of the people, those who mourn their broken fellowship with the Lord, they will be the ones to pass through the fires of the coming judgement to live in that new messianic community of the age to come.

In Psalm 37, David declared, “the meek shall inherit the land and shall take delight in the abundance of peace”. It's ironic, because so many people expected the Messiah to come like mighty David, crashing into Jerusalem to put the enemies of his people to the sword. They expected the kingdom to come by violence. But David himself had declared that it's the meek who would inherit the land—the kingdom, life in the presence of God.

Jesus draws on Psalm 107 when he says that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness or justice will be satisfied. The people longed for justice, but for far too many people in Israel that justice looked more like vengeance than justice and that's not the way. Violence begets violence. It always has and it always will. But Jesus shows the way of the kingdom as he let violence do its worst and then forgave, breaking the cycle and turning evil back on itself. Humility, gentleness, mercy, forgiveness—and a desire to see the wicked repent—that's the way of the kingdom. And, of

course, that's why only the merciful can ever truly know God's mercy.

And the pure in heart. Jesus echoes Psalm 24:3-6. “Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart...He will receive blessing from the Lord, and vindication from the God of his salvation. Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob.” To see the kingdom, to live before the face of God, means you have to value that kingdom. You have to want to be part of the world set to rights—not just to receive its benefits, but truly be part of it. And so outward piety won't do. The people of the kingdom love it, they long for it, they want to be part and parcel of the world set to rights, to contribute to it, and so they don't go through the motions—they're truly pure of heart.

And the peacemakers. The Messiah came to make peace. To make peace with God by bearing in himself the sins of his people that they might be forgiven. And to set us right so that we can be at peace with each other. The vengeful, the violent, the proud—they'll be the ones swept away in the coming judgement. Only the peacemakers—following in the footsteps of their peace-making Messiah—will have a place in the kingdom of peace.

But Jesus also warns these people. To see the kingdom, you're going to have live out it's values in the present evil age, and for that you will be hated, mocked, scorned, and even killed. He goes on in verses 10-12:

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who

were before you.”

To follow Jesus and to live for the kingdom is costly. It means taking up your cross—sometimes very literally. As Jesus would say: The servant is not greater than his master. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you.” When he preached in his hometown of Nazareth, the people were so angry with him that they tried to throw him off a cliff. Before too long the religious leaders would be scheming to have him killed. He knew from the beginning that that was the path he had to take. And he knew his people would suffer for the sake of his name. At the cross the present evil age was dealt a death blow. In rising from the grave Jesus inaugurated the age to come. The present age is passing away and the age to come is breaking in, but Jesus knew that his people would live in the overlap. God brought salvation and renewal this way for a reason. The people of Jesus’ day wanted it to come all at once, but God chose to bring it slowly. People today have the same sort of expectation. They ask how a good God can allow so much evil in the world. But in asking that question, in asking why God doesn’t come and deal with evil we’re showing the same sort of self-righteous mindset that dominated Israel. We’re forgetting that for God to come and deal with evil means that God will not only have to deal with our enemies and the people who cause us grief, but that he’ll also have to deal with *us*. We’re *all* sinners. We’re all responsible for the mess this world is in—some more, some less—but we’ve all contributed to it. And so God sent Jesus to deal with that sin and to inaugurate his kingdom, but he also delays, and in that he gives sinners a chance to repent and turn to him. It also means that those who, in this in-between time, insist on revealing the kingdom, those who insist on confronting the sinful systems of the old age through their poverty of spirit, through their meekness, through their mercy, through their peace-making will face

the same backlash that Jesus faced. As God’s people show the world set to rights, those invested in the way things are will fight back. When God’s people declare that Jesus is the world’s true Lord, the Caesars of this age and their supporters will lash out to silence the challenge.

The martyrs are a testimony to Jesus’ promise. And when you see your brothers and sisters being carried off to die—whether by the Jewish authorities, or the Romans, or Communists, Islamists, Hindus, Buddhists, or radical secularists in our age, it’s easy to fear. Are we really blessed when we are persecuted for the sake of righteousness? This was the purpose behind St. John’s “revelation”. The church was on the verge of being plunged into violent persecution—a time of great trial and tribulation. Would their faith hold? And what about those who died for the sake of faith in Jesus? And so God gave John a vision. Just as Jesus had promised, judgement was coming, first on unbelieving Israel and then on the pagan word of the Greeks and Romans. The scroll of judgement announcing judgement on Jerusalem and Judah is brought forth. The redeeming lamb is now the great lion of Judah. The wrath of God is about to be poured out. And then everything is paused. What’s to happen to the faithful, to Jesus’ people in the midst of the storm. This is where our Epistle picks up in Revelation 7:2-3.

Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, saying, “Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads.”

The imagery here is drawn from Ezekiel. The prophet was shown a vision of Israel’s idolatry and then a vision of a “man clothed in linen” who was directed by the Lord to “put a

mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it” (Ezekiel 9:3-4). In the divine judgement to come, no one was to touch those marked out for the Lord. What the Lord did in Ezekiel’s day was about to happen again, but the Lord would spare the faithful. Those who are sealed by the angel are announced in verse 4:

And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel.

The text goes on to list specifically twelve thousand from each of the twelve tribes. This is the remnant of faithful Israel, much like those marked out in Ezekiel’s vision centuries before. This is the Jewish church of Jerusalem and Judea, those Jews who heard the good news and trusted in Jesus. Those Jews who were appalled by Israel’s abominations. Those who were about to face violent persecution at the hands of their fellow Jews. The Lord would not abandon them, even though they die. He places his mark on them and seals them as his own. And their faithfulness to Jesus the Messiah, is the means by which the nations are brought to the cross. They are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, and they know blessing as a result, because it is through their faithfulness to Jesus that they fulfil the Abrahamic covenant’s call to be a blessing to the nations.

John *hears* the announcement of the sealing of the Jewish church, and then he *sees* a vision of a multitude that could not be numbered, drawn from the nations:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God

who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Revelation 7:9-10)

And jumping down to verse 13:

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?”... And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. (Revelation 7:13-14)

John’s vision now draws on the imagery of the prophet Daniel, who wrote of another time of great distress through which the Lord saw a faithful remnant of his people. The wise amongst them were refined through persecution that they might “shine like the brightness of the sky above” (12:3) so that they would “turn many to righteousness”. Faithful Israel, through her unwavering allegiance to Jesus in this time of trial would serve as the witnesses that will bring the nations to faith in the Lord. The faithfulness of the 144,000, of the Jewish martyrs, their robes soaked in their own blood, brings that multi-ethnic multitude to Jesus that he might wash their robes in his blood and make them part of his people. As Zechariah had prophesied, ten men from the nations, of every tongue, will take hold of the robe of a Jew and say, “Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you!” (8:23)

Brothers and Sisters, because of the faithful witness of the martyrs, you and I are here today in the house of the Lord. Our lessons today remind us their faithfulness to the Lord Jesus, their faithfulness to his kingdom, even in the midst of persecution, was the means by which God brought the nations to himself. It’s also a witness to the faithfulness of God, who fulfils his promises. He gives his own Spirit to his people that they—that even we—might face persecution in faith. Today we see him embracing his people and wiping away their tears.

Revelation tells us the story of our brothers and sisters who lived in the First Century—of those Jewish believers who faced persecution and martyrdom at the hands of unbelieving Israel and of that multitude drawn pagan Greco-Roman world because of their witness. They, too would face persecution at the hands of an empire that would, because of their witness, eventually be brought in submission to the lordship of Jesus. And yet there’s obviously more to the story of Jesus’ people. What we see in John’s vision is intermediate and temporary. The martyrs held close by God as saints on earth and in heaven await the consummation of history, that day when the faithful will follow Jesus in his resurrection, when all things are made new, when heaven and earth are rejoined, and when men and women once again dwell in the presence of the Lord.

Brothers and Sisters, we don’t know what will happen between now and then. We may face our own time of great tribulation one day, but even if we don’t, we continue in the ordinary fight of Christians in every generation against the world, the flesh, and the devil. We face the ordinary troubles of life in an imperfect world and the difficulties of being faithful witnesses of Jesus in a culture that worships its own versions of Caesar and Mammon, Mars and Aphrodite. Let us, like the saints who have gone before, stand firm in faith as stewards of the good news of Jesus and his kingdom, knowing that our God is faithful to his promises. Let us be the people blessed to be a blessing, living out the life and values of Jesus’ kingdom. Let us confront the upside-down values of the world in poverty of spirit, with mourning and meekness, and mercy; let us hunger and thirst for justice as we serve the Lord with pure hearts—lifting the veil on God’s future, showing the people around us what a right-side up world looks like. And no matter the trials and tribulations that come, remember that Jesus has promised to hold us close, even in

death, until that day when he makes all things new.

Let’s pray: Almighty God, you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord: Give us grace so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those inexpressible joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen.*