

ALL SAINTS

After this I beheld, and lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all kindreds & peoples & tongues, stood before the throne.

Every sermon ought to be extension of the Word of God. The choice of our Gospel lesson today makes that a straightforward business, because it is part of an actual sermon of Christ so all we have to do is listen. He has spent all the night in prayer, and now comes down from the mountain; he sat down - the position of teaching and authority & "he began to speak". He is clearly about to say something important.

He goes on to set out a programme for the life of a disciple, the famous Beatitudes: Blessed are you poor etc.. The words he uses are simple to understand, but the implications are enormous; to learn how to put them into practice will take a lifetime. (Compare the simplicity and fewness of the words spoken by the bride and groom during the marriage service.)

Blessed are you poor, blessed are you that hunger, blessed are you who weep, blessed are you when you are hated. Poverty, hunger, sorrow, persecution - we all do our best to avoid them. How can we embrace them as blessings?

Woe to you who are rich, or full, or happy or well spoken of. Love your enemies, offer the other cheek, and so on.

This programme is certainly Radical; to worldly common sense it is perverse and self-destructive. It is in the tradition of the OT Prophets; it promises the reversal celebrated in the Magnificat.

And our response to this alarming teaching may be: This is not for ordinary people like me, it is for saints.

Yes and no. For saints, certainly, but saints is what we are called to be. Today we are keeping the feast of All Saints, not just the famous ones that we know about whom we think of when we hear the word "saint"; they are a tiny proportion of the whole. An Italian friend sent me a calendar with a saint for every day of the year - and that seems a lot to us who are brought up on the modest provision in our church services - but that is still only tiny fraction.

St John the Divine describes his vision of the white-robed army of those who had been faithful to Christ: of the tribe of Judah were sealed 12,000, of the tribe of Reuben /Gad /Aser /Naphtali /Manasses /Simeon /Levi /Issachar /Zabulon /Joseph /Benjamin - of each of these tribes were sealed 12,000 - that is a lot, but then he goes on: After this I beheld, and lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all kindreds & peoples & tongues, stood before the throne.

St John the Evangelist says at the end of his Gospel that the wonderful works of Christ were so many that the world itself could not contain all the books which would have to be written. He is speaking of the works of Christ himself. But since the Ascension his works have been multiplied because they are now performed through his Body the Church with its millions & millions of members, the saints on earth doing God's will.

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews looks back into history, at the chain of people down the centuries who have been faithful to God, even when Christ had not been revealed; after listing a lot of them he goes on: The time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephtha, of David & the

prophets - all these belong to the same army of the redeemed, so they are included in our commemoration today. The traditional icons of Christ's descent into hell show him breaking open the doors of the underworld, going as St Peter says to preach to the souls in prison. He is reaching down into the darkness to help the prisoners to come out: they are Adam and Eve, David and Solomon, the Old Testament prophets, and so on. And underneath in the darkness Satan lies in chains.

Who can count the dust of Jacob? says the book of Numbers, and the number of the fourth part of Israel? This great multitude which no man can number have been waiting be released into the heavenly light by Jesus Christ after his victory on the Cross.

The writer of Hebrews calls the multitude of saints a cloud of witnesses; they are as indistinguishable to us as a swarm of bees, yet all are sealed, known, acknowledged, recorded, ratified by God, just as we are sealed individually at our Baptism & Confirmation, robed, it may be, in white in token of our Christian aspiration, signed with Christ's cross, his brand, to be recognized and owned by him. "Receive the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Those whom we venerate today are we believe now in the land of the living, in God's presence; & our ambition is to be in that same blessed state, to finish the race that is set before us, the same race as they ran, and while we are running, they are leaning over the arena cheering us on, encouraging us to persevere till the end, & win, as St Paul says, the unfading crown of glory.

That is our ambition; and how do we achieve it? The answer will be different for every one of us; each of us has a vocation unique to himself; the saints are infinitely various, but they all have one thing in common: they were obedient to the will of God as it applied particularly to them. And we learn that obedience step by step by lifelong dogged persistence and concentration. Ps 119: Lord, what love have I unto thy law: all the day long is my study in it.

And in mysterious and unexpected ways, different for each of us, the upside-down teaching in Christ's sermon will prove wise and true. Those times when we thought we were badly off will turn out to have been times of blessing, and vice-versa.

Saints are those who through loving attentiveness to God's will were able to learn their particular vocation & ministry. They have become progressively Christlike by cooperating with God; learning little by little what he required of them, until one day they could say with St Paul, I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.

And the time & place to set out on this course is not when we get round to it, after we have sorted out the muddle in our lives, or after certain conditions have been fulfilled, certain obstacles got out of the way - the challenge to us is now, in the middle of our life as it is. Begin where we are, and whatever God wants of us he will show us in good time, call us on the next stage when we are ready. Our intention must always be, in the words of the Catechism: to do my duty in that:state of life unto which it shall please God to call me.