

All Saints Day 2019

Gerry Lynch

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. (Revelation 7:9)

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

That was a great hymn we started with this morning, wasn't it, For All The Saints? And there's more to come later. All the same, the hymn that I've always found most appropriate for this season of All Saints tide isn't in the hymnbook used in this church, the New English Hymnal. At the moment, the New English Hymnal is being revised and I hope they might make space for my favourite All Saints tide hymn in the revision. Can you guess what it is? You'll all know it. It's the one that goes:

♪ *Oh, when the saints!* ♪

♪ *Oh, when the saints!* ♪

♪ *Oh, when the saints come marching in!* ♪

♪ *I want to be in that number, when the saints come marching in!* ♪

Now, the reason for that – that performance – from the trainee preacher from vicar school was to ask you all a question: do you want to be in that number when the saints come marching in? Do you think you have it in you to become a saint? Is saintliness something that we should aspire to? Or does sainthood instead represent an impossibly high standard, and the attempt to achieve it leave us doomed to failure at best, and at worst arrogantly claiming to be far better than we could possibly be, smugly looking down on the rest of humanity from a pedestal so high that it gives everyone else a clear view of our many and obvious faults?

Well, here is what our reading from the Revelation of St John this morning says: “I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues” – all of them – “standing before the throne and before the Lamb”. My friends, heaven is going to be full, and it's going to be full of saints. We will discover there that saints come in all shapes, sizes, and colours, from all cultures and classes. It is going to be the most diverse, vibrant, multi-faceted crowd ever – and the most joyful! I think we might even discover that there are people in Heaven from the tribe called ‘Leavers’ and people in Heaven from the tribe called ‘Remainers’ – and isn't that a dangerously exciting thought in this fractious and divided Britain of 2019? Of course you're going to want to be in that number. It is going to be the most amazing fun... and far more than fun, it is going to be a place where, finally, we are going to be perfectly known even as we know, perfectly loved even as we love.

Do you think about Heaven much? There has been a tendency for Christians for the past couple of hundred years to downplay the Church's promise of eternal life, perhaps stung by criticism from atheists that we were all about ‘pie in the sky when you die’ instead of fixing the problems of the world around us. In fact, as a younger man, I used to always say my Christianity wasn't about what happened in the next life – it

was about the here and now. I still sympathise with that point of view; a Christianity that is not trying to move the world we live in a little bit closer to the Kingdom of God is a deficient Christianity, lacking in the fullness of the good news proclaimed by Jesus Christ. Deficient also is a Christianity that forgets that basic kindness and decency and integrity towards the people immediately around us is part of the package too.

But when I reflect on it, my non-transcendent faith was one that belonged to a young man who'd had a lot of success while young, and it was an easy faith for me to proclaim – after all, people like me were paid well to fix the world's problems, or at least tell other people how to fix the world's problems. What shattered that worldly faith was failure – my own failures, the failures of people I trusted, the cruelty of chance and circumstance over which I had no control. It was only then I realised that a faith that depended on me with all my frailties, and others with all their frailties, to build a perfect world, was doomed to failure. It was then that I rediscovered the promise of heaven.

More than that, my youthful faith was one very much produced of my Sixth Form and undergraduate years, in the optimistic decade after the end of the Cold War, when we really thought we could shift the world up a gear into being something better by an order of magnitude. As we look around today's angry, tribal, embittered and unforgiving world, we might realise that many people could do with rediscovering the promise heaven.

We pray to God that his kingdom come on earth *as it is in heaven*. The Church is called by God to be a sign of the eternal kingdom envisioned in today's reading. What we build on earth can never be perfect, not in this fallen world, because saints aren't perfect – the saints that many of you already are, are not perfect, and the saints that we *all* are, I hope, on the way to becoming are not perfect. Saintliness is something we imperfect people *can* reasonably aspire to.

So, how to you set out to become a saint? I think our Gospel reading this morning gives us some very good advice. Blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are those who mourn; blessed are the meek; and so on. It's certainly not about the things that we achieve or don't achieve; it's more about an attitude of being. We might call it grace. We might connect it with a refusal to lose hope, and love, and faith, in a world where all three are too often cut down by brutal realities. And I think these beatitudes are a very hopeful manifesto, for few of us will manage to embody all of these attributes, but we can all embody some of them. So, when I hear that the meek are blessed, I get a little worried, as meekness isn't exactly... me. But when I hear that those who hunger for righteousness are blessed, I get a bit more hopeful, because while I don't manage to be that like all the time, I have my moments. Moments that with the grace of God, might just form stepping stones to Heaven.

Now, if you really think you won't be in Heaven, and you're worried you might end up in, you know, to use an Oxford term, *another place*, then you need, seriously, to see a priest ASAP. The Church offers God's forgiveness to all who in sincerity turn away from their sins. And if you've just wandered into St Mary Magdalene's this morning, and all this is all new to you, then do please see a priest also, and start a journey with

us of following Jesus Christ. It is the most wonderful journey. It's not always easy, but it is extraordinarily rewarding.

And all of us can right now this morning make a fresh commitment to set out on that path of meekness and integrity and kindness and moral courage that leads to sainthood. It is a path that leads to a fuller, more whole, life *in this world*. And when the saints come marching in, it is the path that will lead you to being in that vast and countless number.