

All Saints Day, November 2nd , 2025

8.00, 10.30 Holy Communion, All Saints Oakham

Daniel 7.1-3, 15-18; Hebrews 11.32-12.3, Luke 6.20-31

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Our readings for today point us in two different directions. The reading from the vision of Daniel, and that from the letter to the Hebrews point us to heavenly things. In Daniel's vision he has a glimpse of the saints in heaven, victorious over the nations and empires of this world. And the reading from Hebrews is the end of a long discourse where the writer reminds his hearers of the examples of Old Testament figures such as Abraham, ending with the phrase

...since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witness...

In their earthly discipleship the writer reminds them that those who have gone before and are now with God in heaven, are still close, as both an example and encouragement. However in the gospel reading the focus is different. We have Luke's version of the Beatitudes, that is very much rooted in the realities of this life. We might perhaps call these verses a description of the way of holiness, the way of blessing, the way of the Saints.

It seems to me that both these perspectives, the heavenly and the earthly are important for us to consider on this day when we celebrate the lives of the saints – and indeed are both necessary for us in our discipleship.

But firstly, who are the saints? In the opening verse of his letter to the church at Philippi. Paul writes

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons.

Here, when he uses the word "saints, Paul is clearly referring to all the Christians in Philippi. One might possibly read it as excluding bishops and deacons from the community of saints if one has a somewhat cynical frame of mind, which while it would match with how many feel about the bishops and clergy today is probably not what Paul meant. Basically the word saint simply applies to all who follow Jesus, and derives from the word that means holy. The way of sainthood is for us all. That being said, the church recognises a large number of such saints as being particularly worthy of remembrance, both for how they lived their lives and as examples for us to follow. These come in all shapes and sizes and, perhaps one might say inevitably, a hierarchy of saints has developed. At the top of this hierarchy we have those saints we find in the bible – Mary, the disciples and so on – they get afforded a special festival with readings and so on. Then below them we have a whole range of mainly quite ancient saints from across the early and medieval church, each with their own "lesser festival" as it is called – ranging from martyrs to missionaries, bishops to monks, teachers to spiritual writers; then below them

we have those who are worthy of a “commemoration”, or just the odd mention in the prayers which include a very wide range of folk from the ancient to the modern, honoured for a wide range of reasons, and often specifically tied to a place. The Anglican churches in Wales, Scotland and Ireland go further with five categories of saints from category 1 that gets a full service, down to category 5 that may not even get a mention in services. All a bit silly really, but that is how it is. After the sermon we will move into a Thanksgiving for the Holy Ones of God, where the names of many saints will be mentioned, who are worthy of our respect and can serve as an example to follow. But this shouldn’t distract from the fact that all of us here who seek to follow Jesus are regarded by him as saints, and we are all called to follow the way of holiness.

So let’s get back to the readings. In the extract from the vision of Daniel, which is just part of a larger and more complex vision of God in heaven, we have a picture of the rise and fall of earthly empires, and despite its other worldly and visionary form addresses the current situation of its hearers, who have suffered under various tyrannies for many centuries. It ends with assurance that

.....the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom for ever—for ever and ever.....

A reassurance that, even in the midst of war and turmoil, God’s people are safe in his hands and will ultimately be vindicated and raised to the highest possible honour. In the letter to the Hebrews, after rehearsing the example set by a range of Old Testament figures, the writer concludes.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith

The writer sees those to whom he was writing, possibly an isolated and threatened small Jewish Christian community, that they were surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. And this idea of the closeness of the heavenly and the earthly, the church triumphant in heaven and the church militant on earth is found throughout the New Testament. We find this in places in Paul’s letters and of course in the visions of Revelation. In John’s gospel, Jesus refers to himself as the true vine, with the disciples as the branches – and you will have seen a copy of a Greek Orthodox icon illustrating this on your way into church. This picture of the vine implies that all Jesus’ followers are deeply connected with him as branches of a tree are connected to trunk and root stock – both those alive and those who are dead. The branches aren’t lobbed off when a disciple dies. In the introduction to services for the All Saints season, the Church of England liturgical commission writes

No Christian is solitary. Through baptism we become members one of another in Christ, members of a company of saints whose mutual belonging transcends death.

In medieval times this closeness of the heavenly and earthly found its expression in the cult of the saints, the very real experience of many that they were in close communion with a favoured saint who would bring their prayers to God. This seems to our modern mind a little fanciful (at least to those from protestant backgrounds) but I don’t think we should reject the notion that in our prayer and worship in particular the wall between the

earthly and the heavenly becomes very transparent. And that realisation can have a transformational effect on our Christian lives. The biblical visionaries prepared themselves for their visions through prayer and fasting, and whilst the same routes are available for us today, I think there is also a need to change our expectations, a role for our imagination perhaps. Francis Thompson wrote about the need to perceive the reality of heavenly things in his poem "In no strange land"

The angel's keep their ancient places; Turn but a stone and start a wing; 'Tis ye, 'tis your estranged faces; that miss the many splendoured thing.

But back to the earthly. The way of holiness set out by Jesus in the version of the Beatitudes that we have read today sets out the way of the blessed, the way of the saints. Or to use the words of last week's Songs of Praise, our earthly pilgrimage. The word blessed has many layers of meaning – fortunate or joyful and approved by God, and it also implies a promise of future comfort and reward. Blessed are the poor – blessed are those who given up material wealth, possessions, security to follow Jesus for they have gained a place the Kingdom of God. Blessed are those who are hungry; hungry for righteousness, hungry for justice for the poor and weak; hungry for the word of God – will be given the sustenance they need. Blessed are those who weep and pray for the church and the world in their brokenness, will laugh with joy when they see God in action. Blessed are those who are hated and reviled for their witness to the gospel, because their reward will be great in heaven. Blessed are those who love their enemy, who return good for evil and return blessings for curses. For that is the way of holiness, the way to joy, the way of the saints.

The way of the saints can be a hard way, but is in some measure a pattern for us all on our Christian walk – to sit lightly to material things, to pursue the good and the holy, to weep and pray with and for the world's victims, and to speak, as far as we are able, for the values of the kingdom. TS Elliot wrote when considering the nature of the world around him, almost a century ago now, words that for me re-echo down the decades.

*It is hard for those who have never known persecution,
And who have never known a Christian,
To believe these tales of Christian persecution.
It is hard for those who live near a Bank
To doubt the security of their money.
It is hard for those who live near a Police Station
To believe in the triumph of violence.
Do you think that the Faith has conquered the World
And that lions no longer need keepers?
Do you need to be told that whatever has been, can still be?
Do you need to be told that even such modest attainments
As you can boast in the way of polite society
Will hardly survive the Faith to which they owe their significance?
Why should men love the Church? Why should they love her laws?
She tells them of Life and Death, and of all that they would forget.
She is tender where they would be hard, and hard where they like to be soft.*

*She tells them of Evil and Sin, and other unpleasant facts.
They constantly try to escape
From the darkness outside and within
By dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.
But the man that is will shadow
The man that pretends to be.
And the Son of Man was not crucified once for all,
The blood of the martyrs not shed once for all,
The lives of the Saints not given once for all:
But the Son of Man is crucified always
And there shall always be Martyrs and Saints.*

The way of the saints is potentially a hard one. And that is why it is important to hold both those perspectives together from our readings today. We need the vision of the saints in heaven, to know that we are part of that great communion of saints, to sustain us as we make our own path along the way of holiness. We need that vision to transform what might be a hard road into a path of joy and celebration. It is often said someone is too heavenly minded to be of any earthly use. I would turn that on its head. To follow God in this world, with all its problems and difficulties we need that vision of the saints in heaven to guide and encourage us, to bring us joy and peace. The reality I would suggest is that we need to be heavenly minded to be of any earthly use at all. In a moment we will give thanks for the Holy Ones of God, and as a focus to our spoken thanksgiving we will use the icon of Christ the True vine and light candles around it as the various saints are mentioned. As we come to communion later and see the icon close up, perhaps we can use it to reflect how we are connected to Jesus, and to his saints alive and dead, and perhaps find encouragement from the lives of the saints in our pilgrimage along the way of the saints.

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