November 1st 2026

All Saints Day

10.30am Holy Communion at All Saints Oakham

Revelation 7.9-e, 1 John 3.1-3, Matthew 5.1-12

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.

On October 12th, the Church of England Calendar commemorates three lives. The first is Edith Cavell, a committed Anglican and a nurse who cared without partiality for British and German soldiers in occupied Belgium in the first world war and helped the latter escape to Holland. She was arrested for treason and executed. The words on her memorial were spoken the night before she died

Patriotism is not enough. I have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone

Words that many in both Britain and Germany would have vehemently disagreed with at the time, and would indeed have regarded them as treasonous by some. The second was Elizabeth Fry, a 19th century Quaker, of very considerable energy who devoted her life to improving conditions for those in prisons and asylums. Yet a recent biographer states she had a

…. complex personality which could be proud, selfish and ruthless for the cause…yet she had the gift of touching people's hearts by her own deep religious feeling and her passionate concern for good…

The third of the triumvirate was Wilfred of Ripon, who died in 709. He had what one might describe as a colourful life, was Archbishop of York as well as Bishop of Ripon, argued with his fellow bishops and the pope, but was instrumental in the Synod of Whitby where the English church aligned itself to the Roman rather than the Celtic model. Contemporary accounts of his life are somewhat circumspect in how they describe him, suggesting that whilst his gift to the English Church was to make it more clearly a part of the church universal, nonetheless a recent hagiography writes

……. his manner and methods were not such as to draw people close to him at a personal level …..

Interpret that as you will! Three very different people, three principled, argumentative people who were probably not at all easy to live with, yet all remembered by the church as saints.

All Saints Day is the day when the Church remembers such as these three and all its heroes of the faith - the church triumphant in heaven, and the church militant here on earth. But the word "saint" of itself has no connotations of exclusiveness, simply meaning someone who is sanctified or holy. Paul in his letters refers to ordinary church members as saints, and that is important to grab hold of – all followers of Jesus are called to sanctification and holiness. We are all, at least potentially, saints.

Now our Gospel reading today is one of the best known of them all - the Beatitudes, that begin the collection of Jesus's sayings known as the Sermon on the Mount. And the repeating word "Blessed" in its biblical sense means "made holy, consecrated, infuse with holiness". And so the reading is very appropriate for the day. Now one, rather simplistic, way of understanding the beatitudes is thus as a sort of entry level exam for sainthood. Work on the characteristics described in the Beatitudes and you will get to be commemorated by the church when you die. It doesn't seem to work that way however. Perhaps the best you can say for someone like Wilfred in that regard was that he was blessed because he was reviled and persecuted, although there is a strong argument that he brought that on himself. Elizabeth Fry and Edith Cavell perhaps hungered and thirsted for righteousness and showed mercy. But all three seemed to have been somewhat lacking in meekness! The Beatitudes spoken by Jesus are much more subtle than that and it is worth just spending a minute or two looking at how they are put together.

There are nine beatitudes in total, and the first eight have the same form - a blessing; a description of a personal characteristic or action or situation; and a reward, which is easily memorable both for the speaker and the listener. The first and the last both give the reward as "theirs is the kingdom of heaven". This is a literary device, well know in the ancient world, beginning and ending a passage or a collection of sayings with a repeated phrase. The sayings themselves seem to be in two groups of four. The four contain an alliteration on the letter pi or p - the Greek words for poor, mourn, meek, hunger all begin with pi. The second group of four contain other alliterations on kappa alpha (k - a) or delta iota (d - i) - again a dramatic literary device of the time; and there is at various points in the verses a duplication of ideas and concepts that is characteristic of Hebrew poetry. In short, the Beatitudes are designed to be spoken aloud, to be remembered, almost as a dramatic piece. Jesus was, as we know, a superb communicator, and we can think of him as carefully constructing the words of the Beatitudes to be spoken aloud to a crowd (and also note that it suggests that Jesus spoke Greek as well as Aramaic and Hebrew). And like any performer, (or even preacher) he used his lines in different circumstances. In Luke we see the first four beatitudes, in a somewhat different form, matched with four "woes" (anti-blessings!), again with pi alliteration.

Why go on about this? Simply because, the form of the sayings suggests that one shouldn't interpret them too tightly on a line by line basis, but rather in a more general sense. To some degree the words are chosen for their sound and effect, rather than for by strict rules of logic. If we look at it in this way, we have the repeated promise of a Blessing, followed in the main by a range of either personal characteristics, actions or situations that lead to that blessing.

'Blessed are the poor in spirit ….. those who mourn…..the meek……. those who hunger and thirst for righteousness……. the merciful…….. the pure in heart'…….the peacemakers ……..those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

In some ways the list is similar to what St Paul describes as the fruits of the Spirit, the work of God in the lives of his people.

……the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control…..

And the rewards are both immediate.

……for they will be comforted…… for they will receive mercy……. for they will be called children of God…..

and offer a promise for the future

for theirs is the kingdom of heaven …… for they will inherit the earth …. .for they will be filled …… for they will see God …… for they will be called children of God ….. for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The kingdom of heaven, the vindication of righteousness, the vision of God for the church triumphant. The ninth beatitude however is rather different, although it does repeat to some extent the last of the eight

'Blessed are you when people 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 in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

It is a blessing on those who are persecuted for their faith. For many Christians down the ages, including not a small number of those we call saints, this promise has sustained them through their darkest times. Someone we only know as John, almost certainly not the apostle or gospel writer, in exile on the isle of Patmos relates his vision of heaven to his readers. It is worth re-reading

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands…… Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?' I said to him, 'Sir, you are the one that knows.' Then he said to me, 'These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'

A pictorial fulfilment of the promises of the Beatitudes if you like. So the Beatitudes are a very appropriate reading for All Saints day, that exhorts all of us as saints to strive for holiness, but also gives a picture of hope for the future. Both are important. They present to us the qualities of life and the action that are important to God and give the comfort of God's presence to those who need it. But in the dark days that we are living through, when we are concerned about the events in the word around us that seem to be spiralling out of control and when it is all too apparent that the Christian faith, and its ethical base on which our society is founded, is being marginalised and those who uphold it face scorn and sometime rage, it is perhaps John's vision of the Church triumphant that we need to sustain us. The biblical "big picture" is that God will gather together his people, his redeemed humanity in heaven in all its diversity, from the heroes of the faith to the myriad of saints who have no memorial, that creation itself will be redeemed. But I doubt that is the end of the matter. If it were, one would have to ask why God bothered, what was the point in simply creating humanity just to exist for eternity in heaven. My feeling is that there is an even bigger picture for what lies beyond, that the purpose of God for his creation, our own part in it, which we don't yet see, will ultimately be revealed. And the characteristics of the saints set out in the Beatitudes are those that will be required for whatever that purpose might be.

But we have to begin where we are now, and the exhortations and promises of the Beatitudes remain as our immediate guide and as our vision, as we seek to live out our lives and to witness to a perplexed world in these most difficult times. We are called, both as individuals and as a church to mourn for our sins and the sins of the world, to live in meekness and humility and to seek righteousness and truth in our relationships, to be merciful and kind to each other, to live in purity and holiness, to be peacemakers. Another John, the writer of the biblical letters, wrote on our epistle

Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

As the Beatitudes have spoken to God's people down the ages, so they speak to us at this All Saints tide.

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